



The best of **BOB RYAN**

44 GEMS FOR 44 YEARS FROM THE LEGENDARY SPORTS WRITER

The Boston Globe

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Tribute to The Commissioner

by Dan Shaughnessy

Congratulations. You're about to read the best of Bob Ryan. It's a treat for anyone who loves sports, good writing and institutional memory.

It could not have been easy shaving this book down to a mere 44 stories and columns. They were all good. Now that I think about it, "The Worst of Ryan" would have been better than "The Best of the Rest of Us."

He's that good.

I've always referred to Bob as "The Commissioner." He truly is our literary "Mr. Basketball." Bob doesn't go back as far as Dr. James Naismith, but it's hard for anyone to remember a time when there was basketball without accompanying commentary from Bob Ryan. I always felt as if the game wasn't really official unless Bob was there to measure the baskets and tell us what we were seeing.

I know too much about him. I know he hated Elvin Hayes and referee Bob Rakel. I know he used to sit down by the visitors bench (back in the days when the media got seats that are now sold to the millionaires) and Washington coach Gene Shue once turned toward Bob and blamed him when an official called a tickey-tack foul on Ricky Mahorn. I remember the night that Dennis Johnson dribbled over toward the writer's row — Bob was carrying on about Larry Bird's greatness — and said, "Hey, Bob. Will you keep it down? We've got a game going on out here." Ryan really is the de factor commissioner. Before an NBA Finals game at the Staples Center a few years ago, I came up behind Ryan and David Stern as they were deep in conversation. I said, "Excuse, me — Commissioner?"

Both men turned around to address my question.

True story.

Ryan changed the way the NBA was covered. He was the final word on every basketball argument (greatest center of all time — Wilt, Russell, or Kareem?) He made his bones explaining the true greatness of Dave Cowens and stuck around long enough to cover LeBron James beating the Celtics in Game 7 in Miami in 2012.

But there was more than basketball. Ryan probably knows more baseball trivia than anyone this side of his bookend brother, Peter Gammons. Ryan and Gammons came to the Globe together in June of 1968 and readers have been blessed ever since.

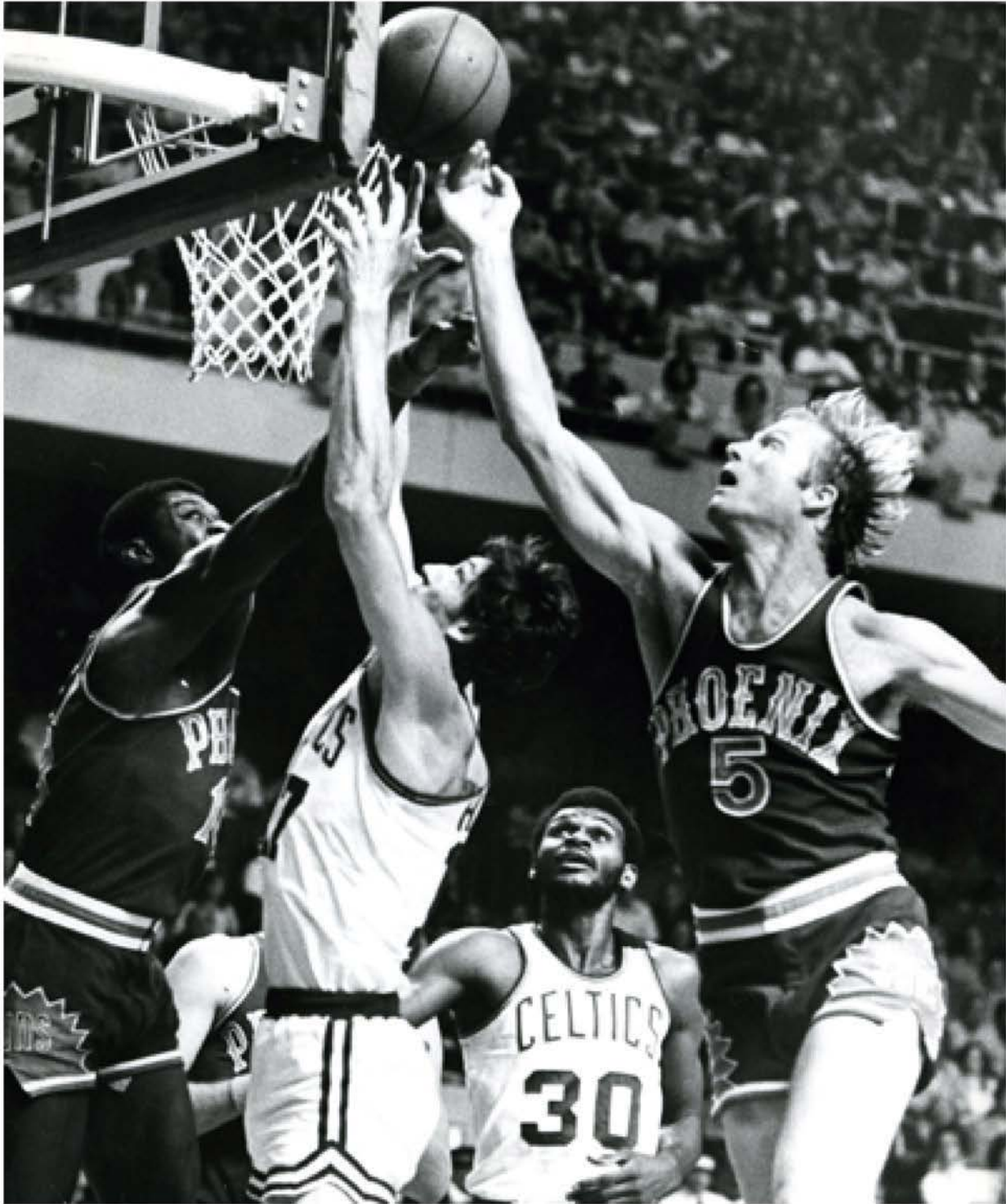
Bob never lost his passion for the games. Into his mid 60s, into “retirement” (we use that loosely), he still cares as much about the games as the rest of us did when we were 12 years old. He was never infected with the cynicism gene.

He is a spectacular writer, mechanically perfect (Lawrenceville Prep), funny and clean. He’s a storyteller. And he has told the story of our teams like nobody else.

So here it is; the best of Bob Ryan.

Just one question: how do you get someone to autograph an e-book?

Celtics



Saturday June 5, 1976

Celtics win

What do you say after you've seen the greatest game of professional basketball ever played? That there should have been two winners? That it would have been a bargain at \$250 courtside? That no matter what happens in the final two games of the 1976 playoffs, two teams with heart are competing in the finals? That perhaps rarely in the history of any professional sport have so many incredible clutch plays have been turned in during one game by so many people?

Yup, yup, yup and no doubt about it. A delirious mob of 15,320 fortunate patrons stayed at the Garden past midnight last evening to see the Celtics grab a 3-2 series advantage by virtue of a dramatic 128-126 triple overtime victory over the valiant Phoenix Suns.

So much happened in the final 10 minutes of this memorable affair that the scintillating first half (in which the Celtics build up a 22-point lead, had it chopped to seven, and then mounted it back again to 16 at the half) seemed as if it had been played back on Easter Sunday.

By the time the team got around to settling the outcome, Dave Cowens, Charlie Scott, Paul Silas, Alvan Adams and Dennis Awtrey had all fouled out, and the game was being decided by the most improbable Celtic playoff hero since Gene Guarillia — Glen McDonald.

It was McDonald, sent into the game when Silas fouled out at 3:23 of the third overtime, who came up with a minute and three seconds of big plays he and all those Celtics fans will long remember. His little spurt began the score tied at 118, that deadlock having been provided by the next-to-last in an incredible string of San Jonesian baskets by Jo Jo White, who crammed 15 of his game high 33 points into the three overtime periods.

At 118-all, Jim Ard (another big hero) won a jump ball from Curtis Perry at the Suns' foul line. That turned into a Boston fast break on which McDonald deftly converted a pretty pass from White. Gar Heard — more on his astounding heroics later — missed a jumper and Don Nelson rebounded. On this transition John

Havlicek spotted McDonald on a cross-over along the let baseline and hit him with a crisp pass. McDonald hit a quick turnaround to make it 122-118.

Paul Westphal (an amazing fallaway) and White matched baskets, before Dick Van Arsdale missed — the Suns were tiring, at long last — and McDonald soared for the rebound. Curtis Perry (another hero in defeat) fouled him in the backcourt and McDonald calmly tossed in two free throws to give Boston a 126-120 advantage with 36 seconds remaining.

But these were the Phoenix Suns, a team which is becoming synonymous with such adjectives as gutsy, spunky, gritty and classy. The game was far from over, even when Ard, fouled intentionally off the ball, made two foul shots with 31 seconds left.

Those Ard foul shots were sandwiched between a pair of Phoenix baskets, a lay-up by Ricky Sobers — he's a rookie? — and a driving 360-degree banked spinner by Westphal. When McDonald lost the ball underneath the Boston basket, Westphal wound up with a sneakaway lay-up to close the gap to 128-126 with 12 seconds to play.

Again the Suns threatened, when Westphal actually got his fingertips on a looping pass intended for Ard. But Ard kept possession, and the Celtics were finally able to run out the clock, even as Heard and Van Arsdale were vainly trying to foul away from the ball in the hopes of regaining possession.

But if the ending was a battle of punched-out heavyweights, what set it up was worthy of Graziano-Zale at their peak. Take, for example, the second overtime, the final 19 seconds of which included: A White drive to give Boston a 109-108 lead; a Van Arsdale 18 footer four seconds later; an immediate Westphal steal from Havlicek on the inbounds pass; a Perry third try swisher from 15 feet to give the Suns their third lead of the entire game; a Havlicek leaning banker with two seconds to play to give the Celtics, and their fans, what they thought was a 111-110 triumph; a crowd celebration on the court; a declaration by the officials that the Suns would still get a second to play; a technical foul on Phoenix for calling a time out they didn't have in order to get the ball at mid-court; a White conversion of the technical

to make it 112-110; and finally a perfect toss into the basket with no time remaining by Heard to send it into the third overtime.

Somewhere back around the start of the 6 o'clock news the Celtics had come blasting out of the locker room to annihilate Phoenix with great shooting (8 for 11 to start the game) and defense to move ahead by scored of 32-12 and 32-14.

The resilient, patients Suns were unmoved by the experience: they fought doggedly and implemented an increasingly sticky to defense to pull within 16 (61-45) at the half and within five (77-72) after three quarters. Seemingly dead while trailing, 92-83 with 3:40 left, they rallied behind Westphal go ahead, 95-94, on a Perry free throw which Havlicek matched with 19 seconds to play in regulation.

Towering figures abounded on both sides, but The Man with all the money on the table was White, who established his backcourt pre-eminence in this series with a great show. But any number of people could ask for a bow. To have seen this masterpiece was a privilege, and nothing less.

Monday, May 4, 1981

The improbable dream

The Ghosts of Celtics Past didn't win it. The fans didn't win it. Their own shooting — be it from the floor or the foul line — certainly didn't win it.

Defense won it. Inspired, determined — maniacal is not even too strong a word — defense won it. It was more than a clinic; it was an entire post-graduate course, and because of it the 1980-81 Celtics have become a major part of basketball history.

What seemed so totally improbable with 1:43 remaining in Wednesday's fifth game, when the 76ers were one intelligent possession away from dispatching the Celtics in five games, became a gratifying reality yesterday with a 91-90 victory that completed a three-game blitz of the Sixers and sent the Celtics into the championship final against the Houston Rockets tomorrow night at the Garden.

As has been written approximately 173,464 times in the past week, only three other teams in NBA history had successfully extricated themselves from a 1-3 hole in a seven-game series. But in none of the other cases did the comebacking team win the three games it needed by margins of two, two and one points. In none of the other cases did the comebacking team continually rebound from serious deficits the way this Celtic team did in the past three games. It is neither a hyperbolic, nor an ethnocentric statement to contend that this was, without question, the gutsiest series comeback in the 35-year history of the world's foremost basketball league.

In order to win the game, the series and the everlasting devotion of a fanatical following that has become as intense as any this town has ever seen, in any sport, the Celtics held the 76ers to one point in the Philadelphians' last 10 possessions. Trailing by an 89-82 score with 5:24 remaining following a classically acrobatic Julius Erving reverse layup of his own miss, the Celtics limited the 76er offense to a lone foul shot by Maurice Cheeks with 29 seconds left, and Boston leading by that 91-90 score. In those final 324 seconds, the 76ers committed five turnovers (three being steals by the truly incomparable Larry Bird, of whom too much simply cannot be said), missed six shots (three on one possession) and came away with that one foul shot when two were needed.

Bird capped a series in which he averaged 27 points and 13 rebounds a game with what proved to be the game-winning basket, a Havlicekian stop-and-pop banker from 17 feet on the left following his own defensive rebound. The score was tied at 89 apiece with 1:07 left (on two Bird foul shots — he is shooting 91 percent from the line in the playoffs) when Darryl Dawkins powered in for a layup. Now it must be understood that during those final five-plus minutes only acts considered to be barbaric by Huns and Visigoths were to be considered worthy of Darrell Garretson's and Jake O'Donnell's whistles. Both Robert Parish and Cedric Maxwell hammered Double D, who, not too surprisingly, missed the shot. Bird somehow emerged from the ensuing altitudinous convention of violent tall people with the rebound, whereupon he proceeded down the left sideline.

"I don't really know what happened," Bird later explained, "but I wanted the ball in my hands. That's the only place in the world I wanted it." He never gave it up, dribbling into the forecourt and calmly banking in the tie-breaking basket with 1:03 left.

But this was hardly the end of the story. When M.L. Carr picked off an atrocious right-to-left Erving cross-court pass intended for Bobby Jones 14 seconds later, the fans were ready to light up their mental cigars. But Lionel Hollins poked the ball away from Gerald Henderson, and away went Cheeks, who would wind up being fouled by a retreating Henderson with 29 seconds left.

The Celtics had one thing in their favor; namely, that they were not in the bonus. This became a paramount issue when Cheeks' first attempt clanked off to the right. He sank his second shot, pulling the Sixers within one point.

The Celtics worked the ball down until Carr fired up a corner jumper with six seconds remaining in the game, and one on the 24-second clock. Parish, a major factor amidst some foul trouble, picked off his fifth offensive rebound of the day, only to lose it to Jones with one second to play.

One more second of good defense now separated the Celtics from their 14th trip to the championship final. Jones tried a lob pass underneath to Erving, but the ball hit the top of the backboard, and Maxwell came down with the rebound as the delirious patrons mobbed the floor.

The Celtics had somehow prevailed despite shooting 36 percent from the floor and — ugh — 63 percent from the line. They had done it despite again spotting the 76ers a double-digit second-half lead, this one a pair of 11-point (67-56, 69-58) third-quarter deficits.

Boston never really had any outside shooting, except an occasional Bird jumper. Archibald shot 3 for 14. Chris Ford was 3 for 10. Parish was a mediocre (for him) 7 for 17. The bench shot a combined 4 for 19. So what did the Celtics do for offense?

One thing they had was Maxwell, who submitted a 19-point, 6-rebound game on top of another outstanding defensive job on Erving. They also had control of the offensive boards, where they bagged 19 points on 18 offensive rebounds, to Philly's 8 and 14, respectively. Eight of Parish's 16 points were on the offensive boards. And, of course, they had Bird, whose 23 points included his second three-pointer of the playoffs.

Philly had gotten off to a very encouraging start (31-26 after one period) thanks to the combined 14-for-14 shooting of Dawkins (16), Bobby Jones (13) and Caldwell Jones (12, but none in the second half). Not until Caldwell missed a hook with the Sixers up by a 39-30 score did a member of that triumvirate miss a shot. Philly had also come out running (the Sixers were even aping the Celtics by running after Boston baskets), and appeared to be doing a good job of forcing the play in their unenviable role as the visiting team to a lion's den.

Boston found itself in the Sisyphus role by the third period. The Celtics knocked a 53-48 halftime deficit down to one at 55-54 (thanks to Bird's three-pointer), only to see the Sixers respond with a 12-2 blast capped by a four-point play (Cheeks three-point followup and a rare technical on Bird) that built the lead to 11. At 69-58 Rick Robey literally picked himself off the floor and stuck in a jump hook to key a little run that narrowed the deficit to three (69-66). Baskets by Steve Mix (with whom Robey had a brief post-third quarter jam) and Cheeks boosted the lead to seven before the Celtics succeeded in entering the final period down by four (75-71).

Spurred by the crowd, the Celtics opened the fourth period with eight unanswered points in the first 2:12, the final two being a clock-beating bomb by Carr. What Boston did not know was a) that it would go 6:44 without a field goal and b) that Doctor J was preparing his final series assault.

Erving, only a peripheral offensive factor in the final four games of the series, threw his artillery at the Celtics over the next four and a half minutes, scoring 10 points on everything from a graceful fadeaway to the pretty followup that gave the Sixers the 89-82 lead with 5:24 to play.

But somewhere in here the Celtics decided that Erving just wasn't going to beat them, that somebody else would have to do it. "We began doubling Doc," recalled Bird. "We knew they were calling the 4 play, and we started doubling him. It was almost helter-skelter. We started to go after everything."

Philly's demise began with an Andrew Toney (and whatever happened to him?) miss at 4:48, a shot leading to a Maxwell fast-break free throw. Bird promptly stole an Erving pass for what would prove to be the first of three consecutive Sixer turnovers. The momentum was all Boston's now, especially since the referees were,

uh, letting ‘em play underneath. Bird’s theft of a Bobby-to-Caldwell dish-off at 4:02 became a Parish turnaround jumper with 3:44 to play (89-87). Bird tied the game at 89 with two foul shots (2:51) following a Hollins turnover. And that’s where the scoreboard remained until the Bird banker, staying the same through three Philly misses (Erving twice and Hollins) and an Archibald missed jumper.

The defense had done it, all right, and what is defense but a product of determination and industriousness? “Philly is a better team physically,” said Maxwell. “They have more natural talent than us. I’m not saying we don’t have a lot of talent, but they can run faster and jump higher. The moral of this story is that a good team can beat a squad. They’re a good team, but we executed better in the end.”

To defeat an outfit strong as Philadelphia three straight times, however, a team needs something else. It needs luck, for sure, and it also needs heart. Even down six points on Wednesday with 1:43 left, the Celtics still thought they could win.

“Everybody believed,” said Chris Ford. “We did it because we never stopped believing.” Think about this: In the past quarter century, has any other local institution, be it academic, financial, ecclesiastical or athletic, given local citizens more to believe in than the Boston Celtics?

Monday, April 21, 1986

The show is Jordan’s — but Celtics steal it

Only one man in the history of the NBA play-offs knows what it feels like to score 63 points at the highest level of competition and be denied the sweet smell of team success. But the hoop world knows that every other player and every other team is on borrowed time. The Celtics, Lakers, Hawks, Rockets and every other 1986 title aspirant had better seize whatever opportunity they can — Now! — because we are clearly at the dawn of the Age of Jordan.

“I would never have called him the greatest player I’d ever seen if I didn’t mean it,” said Larry Bird after yesterday’s exhilarating, stimulating, emotional, exhausting and altogether brilliant contest. “It’s just God disguised as Michael Jordan.”

Bird’s equation of Jordan to the Deity is understandable in light of Jordan’s record-breaking 63-point effort in the Garden (a display that surpassed Elgin Baylor’s 1962 play-off standard of 61), but let the record show that Bird was able to speak in the pleasant afterglow of victory. Despite all Jordan’s virtuosity, the Celtics constructed a 2-0 series lead by walking (staggering would be a more apt description) off with a 135-131 double-overtime triumph in what could accurately be described as an epic contest.

They play ’em and we rate ’em, and there is no question that this game will make the Top 5, and maybe even the Top 3, of Greatest Celtic Playoff Games Ever among the Garden cognoscenti. This was pure athletic theater, and not until Orlando Woolridge air-balled a desperation three-pointer with two seconds remaining in the second OT was there a legitimate chance for any Celtic owner, general manager, coach, player or fan to relax and light up that mental cigar. As long as Mr. Jordan is known to be present in this hemisphere, no rival lead is safe, no palm is dry, no throat swallows easily and no stomach is settled. A man who scores 63 points out of the flow is a man to fear, respect and idolize.

But justice, as we witnessed in Holmes-Spinks II, has nothing to do with winning and losing, for despite Jordan’s 22 field goals and 63 points, he didn’t make the biggest basket of the long, long afternoon. Jerry Sichting, a player whose game is to Jordan’s as a 1955 Studebaker is to a 1986 Porsche, had that honor. For it was Sichting who took an inside-out pass from Kevin McHale and did what he has done faithfully all year — swished the foul line jumper. That basket broke the game’s 13th tie and gave the Celtics a 133-131 lead with 57 seconds left in the second OT. And when Jordan missed a left baseline jumper on the next Chicago possession, Robert Parish rebounded.

The ball went to Bird (36 points, 12 rebounds, 8 assists), who orchestrated a two-man game on the right wing with Parish. “As soon as he set the pick and rolled, I gave it to him,” said Bird, unconcerned that Parish had not scored a jumper all night and had established a bad case of the oopsies in his infrequent drives to the

hoop. “When he goes, you’ve got to give him the ball. You don’t worry about Robert Parish. I never do, because he’s made a lot of big plays for this team.”

That’s no lie, and this time he took the pass and swished a 12-foot moon shot on the right baseline to give Boston a four-point lead (135-131) with nine seconds remaining.

The best shot Chicago could get was the weak Woolridge three-pointer. The ball was inbounded to Bird, who just stood with it to await the ending of a truly spectacular afternoon of playoff basketball.

In any game such as this, there is invariably an individual of whom it can safely be said, “Without him, this would definitely have been an L.” Yesterday afternoon, that man was the oft-maligned Danny Ainge.

You never would have pegged Ainge as a potential hero midway through the third quarter. He hadn’t even scored a point by the time the aggressive young Bulls claimed their final 10-point lead (69-59). But before the period was over, he had erupted for 13, including 11 in the final 2:36, the last three of which came on a three-pointer that brought the struggling Celtics within one at 84-83.

Ainge would wind up with 24, and he would score two giant baskets, the first a left-handed lane drive that would tie the score at 125-125 with 12 seconds left in the first OT, and the second an open 18-footer that would give Boston a brief 131-127 lead in the second OT, a lead that was quickly wiped out via two quick hoops by the irrepressible Jordan.

Chicago abandoned the first-game strategy of continual Jordan isolations, and he proved how brilliant he was by performing even better in the context of a normal offense than he did when 90 percent of the action was directed his way. The Bulls took the lead at 4-2 and clung to it stubbornly until a clock-beating 28-foot three-pointer by Bird gave Boston the lead at 93-92 and created the first of nine consecutive lead changes through 102-100, Boston (an inside-out three-pointer by Bird from McHale).

Boston did everything but summon the ghost of Walter Brown in an attempt to knock out the Bulls, but the visitors would not succumb. A 108-104, fourth-quarter

lead soon turned into a 111-110 Chicago advantage on the Jordan basket that gave him an even 50 points. A 116-113 lead with 45 seconds remaining in regulation (an Ainge-to-McHale alley-oop) evaporated when Charles Oakley hit a free throw with 34 seconds left, leading to the sequence (Bird miss, Parish momentary rebound and Chicago steal/strip/maul/who-knows-what-but-no-call) that set up the game's most controversial happening.

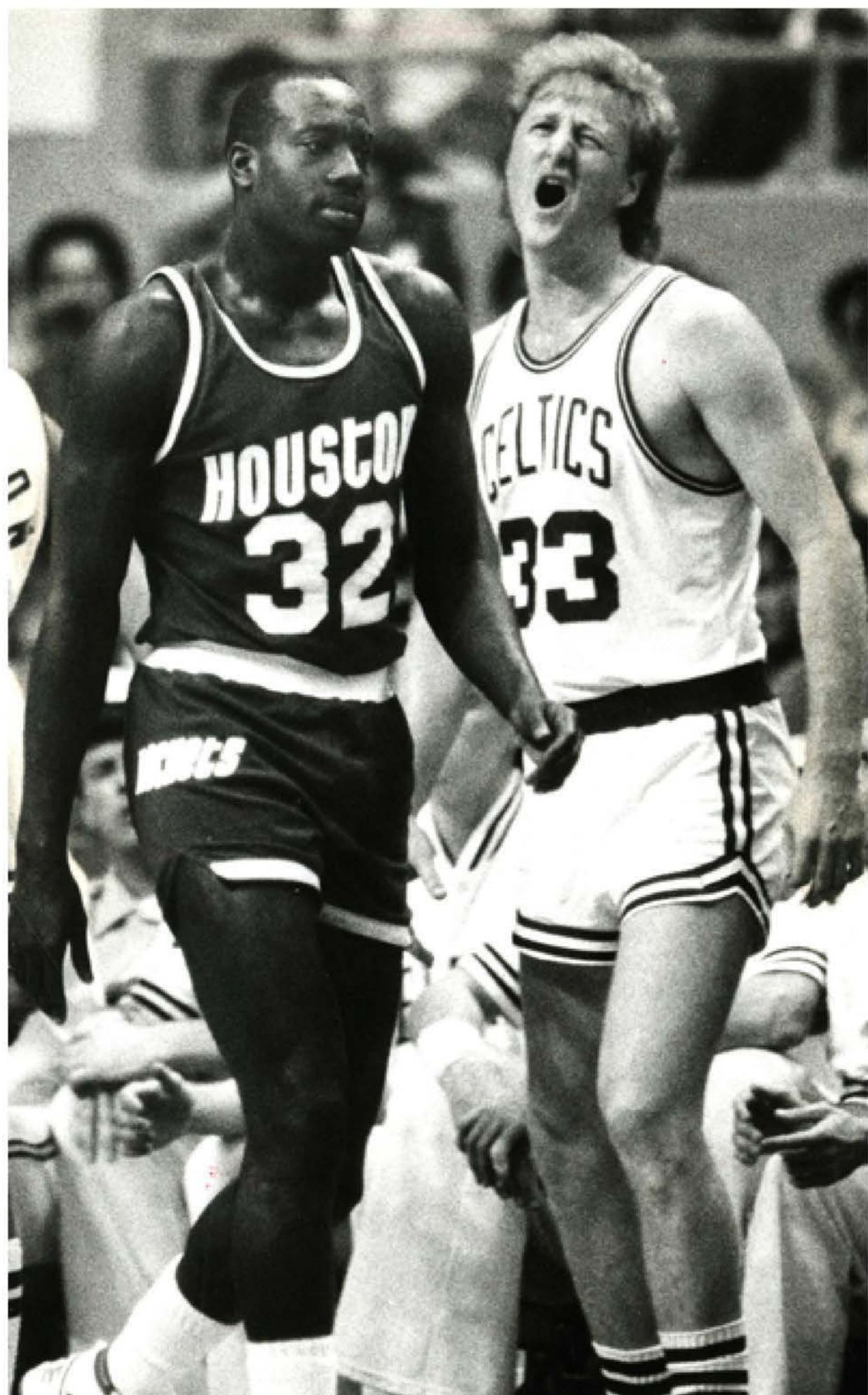
Leading, 116-114, with six seconds left, the Celtics had to dig in one last time to preserve the lead. With about one second left, Jordan up-faked Dennis Johnson and threw up a three-pointer that clanged off the rim as McHale arrived on the scene. Referee Ed Middleton called a foul on McHale after the shot. Did Jordan get hit? Did he spread-eagle smartly upon release and hit McHale? Do you ever make a call like this? Middleton did, and Jordan, naturally, sank both shots to create OT No. 1.

The Bulls surged ahead by four (123-119) on a Jordan three-point play with 1:39 left, but Sichting canned a corner jumper (missing the affixed free throw) and Ainge came through with that clutch drive. Jordan missed an unmolested left-side jumper and Bird rebounded with two seconds left. A Bird three-pointer was long and the weary troops entered the second OT.

Way, way back in this one, many amazing things had gone on. For example, Bill Walton (who fouled out with 6:10 left in regulation) grabbed 13 rebounds in 13 first-half minutes. Sidney Green and Oakley had made breathtaking tap-ins. Bird, after going 0 for 5 in the first quarter and then hyperextending his right pinkie (forcing him to play with it taped to its neighbor), came out to hit nine of his next 11 shots, including two three-pointers. McHale scored a fourth-quarter basket while actually sitting on Dave Corzine. And every primary Celtic had gotten himself into foul trouble (the first six guys, Walton being No. 6, compiled 31 fouls).

All the while, Jordan just kept scoring. And scoring. And scoring. This way. That way. Horizontally. Vertically. Diagonally. In ways never conceived of by Hank Luisetti, Joe Fulks, Paul Arizin or even World B. Free. And, reminded Parish, "It's not like he was doing it in a summer league."

A question now arises: What is Michael Jordan capable of doing in his own building? Two-and-zero looks about 100 times better than 1-1 right now.



Monday, June 9, 1986

Celtics' crowning glory

The Houston Rockets were like an unwary couple pulled over on the highway for going 3 miles over the speed limit by a burly Georgia cop with the mirrored sunglasses.

It wasn't their day. The cop's name was Bird. The bailiff's name was Bird. The court stenographer's name was Bird. The judge's name was Bird. And the executioner's name was — guess what? — Bird.

Welcome to Bird Country, boys, and while you're at it, why don't you congratulate the Boston Celtics on the occasion of their 16th NBA championship? He didn't make every shot, or grab every rebound, or account for every assist, or make every steal, or sell every hot dog, but he plugged himself into every conceivable aspect of the game to the extent that all the other players had to do was feed off his energy level. "Let's face it," said Kevin McHale, "when you play with a guy like Larry Bird, it gives you a lot of confidence."

Yesterday's final was Boston 114, Houston 97. The Celtics never trailed. There were no ties. The closest spread in the final 2 1/2 periods was 11. With 7:20 remaining, it was up to 30 at 97-67. The suffocating Boston defense held Houston to 35 percent shooting in the first three periods.

The tone of the game was established in the first minute and a half. Ralph Sampson (who was to no-shows what Buddy Rich is to drummers) missed the first Houston shot and referee Jake O'Donnell called a loose-ball foul on Robert Reid. Whoa . . . there were no questionable loose-ball fouls called on the Rockets in Houston during Game 5.

Dennis Johnson drove to the basket, and McHale (29 points, 10 rebounds) shoved it back in with the underside of his left hand. Whoa . . . the Celtics weren't getting second shots in Houston. Houston set up, and Bird stole a Rodney McCray pass to start a fast break. McHale finished off with a silly- looking runner that bounced around a few times and fell in. Whoa . . . the rims in Houston would have

kicked that baby all the way to Galveston, or so it seemed. Gee, it's great to be back home again.

Johnson, guarding Reid for the first time in the series (he simply asked K.C. Jones for the assignment), made him feel as if he were wearing a rain-soaked overcoat. The man who had 13 assists by halftime of Game 5 had 2 points and 2 assists by this intermission.

Down deep, McHale was swallowing the villainous Sampson (1-for-8 first half), Robert Parish was denying Akeem Olajuwon, and Bird was somehow or other playing McCray, Sampson, Olajuwon, Reid, Lewis Lloyd and every other Rocket this side of Zaid Abdul-Aziz.

"It was just tough defense from start to finish," said DJ. "Tenacious. They couldn't stand it."

By the first Houston timeout (14-6, Boston, at 8:32), the Rockets had more turnovers (5) than field goals attempted (4). At 20-9, the Rockets called for a 20-second timeout, as the Celtics had picked up 12 points via fast breaks and 4 more via second shots. It was pretty clear that the man in charge had put a whole new record on the turntable than the wall of noise he had on there the other night. This was a song the Celtics could dance to.

"The game just started totally different than the ones in Houston," reflected Jerry Sichting, who was a part of a big second-quarter unit. "We came out and picked up on defense. We should never have let it happen down there, but we knew how to correct the problem."

After Bird fed McHale for a dunk to make it 22-10, the Rockets made the first of two significant runs. Olajuwon brought them back with three consecutive steals on passes intended for Bill Walton, who at that point probably wished he could have traded places with Jerry Garcia's guitar pick.

"Here I was, just in the game, and I lose the ball three straight times," said Walton. "All I was thinking was that Larry was going over to K.C. and saying, 'Get that guy out of here!'" "Walton would stick around to submit 10 points and 8 rebounds.

But Houston never could pull ahead. The Rockets got within one at 22-21 (McCray layup after Olajuwon steal No. 3) and 24-23 (McCray right-back fast-break layup). When McCray missed an attached free throw, Olajuwon grabbed the rebound and missed a turnaround. It would be Houston's last chance to go ahead.

By period's end, the Boston lead was up to 29-23. Houston crept back within three at 31-28, only to see the game get completely away from them in the next 5:28 as the unit of Bird, McHale, Parish, Sichting and the invaluable Danny Ainge (19 points, 4 assists, 2 steals and 7-for-9 shooting) ran off a 16-4 spurt to make it 47-32.

By halftime, Bird was well on the way to his third triple-double of the playoffs and second of the Finals with 16 points, 8 rebounds, 8 assists, 3 steals and the wettest, dirtiest, grungiest-looking uniform since Pepper Martin's in the '31 Series. He had involved himself in every conceivable operation during an emotional half of basketball, once bringing back John Havlicek memories with a fast-break leaner from the foul line and another time even winning a first-period jump ball from Olajuwon.

It was 55-38 at the half, and the only reason it wasn't worse was Boston's atrocious foul shooting (11 for 21 in the first half). Seventeen is a nice margin, but the Celtics weren't merely interested in maintaining it. Embarrassed by the goings-on in Game 5, they wanted scalps.

And so did the fanatical crowd, which had gotten on Sampson from the beginning, and wanted a game to place in the all-time memory bank. The fun really began at 59-45 when Parish hit Ainge for an inside-out, left-corner, buzzer-beating three-point swisher. Sampson (one field goal in the first 32 minutes) missed a hook and Ainge converted on a three-on-one fast break. Bird stuck in a three-pointer from the left with the arc of a Wade Boggs line drive (69-49). DJ made a power lefthanded right-to-left drive. Parish hit a moon shot. The Celtics led by 21 (82-61) after three.

Bird had one great crowd-pleasing move left in his repertoire. In his seven years, he has done a lot of outrageous things, but what he did at 84-61 ranks right near the top of anyone's list. He received a behind-the-back pass from Walton on the left baseline, fumbled the ball, realized the 24-second clock was near expiration, and

instead of dribbling toward the hoop for a potential foul, he started making his way through an obstacle course to the three-point line in the next corner. Arriving at his destination, he turned and swished a three-pointer. The sound that followed only remotely could be described as noise.

Bird finished with 29 points, 11 rebounds and 12 assists, and he was awarded the Sport magazine MVP award. He had promised the world beforehand that “everything’s gonna be just fine,” and, as usual, he had delivered. Marveled Houston’s Jim Petersen, “I saw him take on five guys by himself. He’s the best. At times, he doesn’t seem to need teammates.”

“Larry Bird,” said K.C. Jones, “is where he wants to be. He has reached the pinnacle of basketball.”

And so have the Celtics, whose victory yesterday was the 47th in 48 tries on the parquet, and who finished the season with 38 consecutive victories at home. “They weren’t beating us here today,” said McHale. “They hurt us the worst way they could in Game 5. They hurt our pride. It’s not often that 12 guys together have on their game face, but that’s what happened today.”

And they’ll all admit that one face was a little grimmer, a little meaner and a little more meaningful than all the others. “Nothing Larry Bird does surprises me,” declared Bill Walton, “and everything he does impresses me.”

Which is very similar to the way the NBA has viewed the Celtics as a whole for the past 29 years.

Wednesday, May 27, 1987

And Bird steals the ball...

The message is clear. If you want to beat Larry Bird in a big game, you’ve got to play the full 48 minutes. Forty-seven minutes 56 seconds isn’t enough.

Four seconds shy of what would have been the most meaningful triumph in the entire Detroit phase of this franchise, the dazed Pistons saw it all evaporate when

Bird intercepted Isiah Thomas' inbounds pass to Bill Laimbeer, then turned and fed a streaking Dennis Johnson for a layup with one second remaining to give the Celtics a 108-107 triumph last night and a 3-2 lead in the best-of-seven Eastern Conference finals.

Now it's Move Over, Hondo. All John Havlicek did on that April night 22 years ago was preserve a 1-point lead. What Bird and trusty Dennis ("The- Best-Player-I've-Ever-Played-With") Johnson did was rescue a completely lost cause and provide the battered Celtics with a pivotal triumph in what has become a tremendous battle of will.

"I thought we played a terrific game and showed great courage," said hugely disappointed Detroit coach Chuck Daly. "We basically had the game won with five seconds to go, but we made one mistake on the inbounds."

Boston had regained possession following a classic Thomas one-on-one spinner from the key that had made it 107-106, Detroit, with 17 seconds remaining. The teams had been locked in deadly embrace for the final 4:28, or ever since a pair of Bird free throws tied the game at 95 and enabled the icy (3 for 14 to start Period 4) Celtics, who again had lost Robert Parish with an ankle injury, to get the game even after falling behind by a 93-88 score earlier in the quarter.

A tough corner jumper by Bird had given the Celtics a 3-point bulge at 104-101 (1:13), but Detroit, which showed exemplary resilience all night long, calmly fought back, getting it to 1 at both 104-103 (two Thomas free throws) and 106-105 (a Laimbeer foul-line jumper in response to a Danny Ainge basket). When Bird couldn't get a little jump hook to drop, the Pistons had the ball back with 28 seconds left, trailing by 1.

Detroit called time out, and when play resumed, Isiah took Jerry Sichting and beat him on the spin move. The Celtics called time and eventually gave the ball to Bird, who drove the left baseline on three Pistons. Dennis Rodman smashed the ball away. Sichting tried to save the ball from going out of bounds, but it was given to Detroit with four seconds left.

The Pistons had a timeout, and Daly wanted one. "I tried to get one," he explained, "but with all the noise, well, he (Isiah) elected to throw it in, and Bird made a great play after he had missed a shot and got the ball to Johnson for a layup."

Bird was guarding Joe Dumars at the foul line when Thomas took the ball out. "I saw Laimbeer standing there," said Bird, "and I was going to foul him real quick. But then I saw the ball was kind of lobbed up there and I saw I had a chance to steal it. As soon as I got it, I was going to shoot. I was counting four seconds in my head, and then I turned around and saw DJ cutting down the lane."

"You can see I should have called a timeout," said Thomas. "You can see I should not have thrown the pass. You can see I should have thrown the ball harder or Bill should have come in. But all I can say is they stole the ball and they won the game."

And once Bird caught the ball, he turned and surveyed the situation. Johnson, being Mr. Fundamental I, did what came naturally, which was to cut hard to the hoop. Bird, being Mr. Fundamental II, slipped him the ball. DJ stuck in a backhander as Dumars desperately tried to stop the shot.

The Pistons still had a second to go. They called time and decided to have Adrian Dantley inbound the ball from midcourt. His pass to Laimbeer bounced off the Detroit center's hands and out of bounds. A grueling evening of basketball was over.

The Celtics had somehow escaped despite going 7:25 without a field goal from the 3:16 mark of the third quarter (a DJ corner shot making it 81-75, Boston) till the 7:41 mark of the final period, when Bird nailed a jumper. Boston failed to score on its first six fourth-period possessions, covering seven shots, and in so doing were fortunate to be down by just 1 at 89-88 when the dry spell ended.

But Detroit, which had come back from a first-half 12-point deficit (48-36) and a second-half 11-point deficit (69-58) was apparently ready to assert final control, going up by a 93-88 score on a fast-break dunk by Rodman before a Kevin McHale keep-alive led to a Bird follow-up three-point play (93-91).

From that point on, the game was war.

“That was a playoff game,” said Celtics assistant coach Jimmy Rodgers, the official spokesman last night. “It was the first time in this series we saw what the playoffs are really all about. Big plays by both sides . . . great hustle . . . determination from the start.”

The Celtics kept trying to KO the Pistons, and Detroit kept picking itself up off the canvas. At the 69-58 juncture, for example, Dantley (25), Thomas (17 points, 11 assists) and Laimbeer (16 points, 14 rebounds) led a 13-2 Detroit countersurge that eliminated any Boston blowout thoughts and made it a game once again. Detroit had responded similarly in the second quarter when Boston rattled its sabre to the tune of the 48-36 lead.

And with four seconds left, the Pistons were one successful inbounds pass and a couple of inevitable free throws away from becoming the first team to defeat Boston in a 2-2 situation here in 25 years.

Bird was on the verge of being a heroic loser with 36 points, 14 rebounds, 9 assists and 11 fourth-quarter points. Until those final four seconds, however, he didn't have a steal. He does now.

With one play, Larry Bird stole a ball game and concurrently broke a few hundred thousand Michigan hearts. If the Pistons didn't know it before, they know it now: The path to the Finals goes right through Route 33.

February 4, 1993

The Bird Legend

If timing is everything, as some say, then to be a Houston Rocket on the afternoon of Sunday, June 8, 1986, was surely The Worst Timing Ever to the 10th power.

These unfortunate men were the opponents on a day when Larry Bird had reached the apex of his career. Men have compiled far gaudier stats, but there has never been a display of basketball virtuosity better than this one. Larry Bird was wounded (in the spirit, that is). Larry Bird was angry. Larry Bird was healthy. Larry

Bird was ready. The 1986 Finals were going to end on this day, in this arena, and that was the end of the story. This was the day when everything Larry Bird knew about the game and felt about the game was going to be combined with the highest level of technical proficiency. Larry Bird was going to go as far as anyone possibly could go in this game, involving himself in every aspect at both ends of the floor.

The background was ugly. Game 4 had been a sensational, tense, artful struggle. The Celtics had beaten the Rockets to go up, 3-1, thanks to a killer 3-pointer by Bird and a vital follow-up 3-point play by Bill Walton. It had been the best-played Final game in more than 10 years.

But Game 5 was an aberration. It was a gang warfare. There had been a fight involving 7-foot-4-inch Ralph Sampson and 6-1 Jerry Sichting. The Celtics had been annihilated on the boards. When the teams arrived back in Boston, the papers were filled with stories about The Horror of It All and how the young, tough Rockets were just too much for the Celtics to contend with.

Larry Bird smirked.

"I'm going to have a good game," he said the day before the game. "I know that. Rebounding's a problem, so I'm gonna rebound. I don't have to score a bunch of points, 'cause everyone's got to get involved . . . I don't guarantee victory, but I know we're gonna play well . . . We'll have the fans behind us . . . I think everything's gonna be just fine."

That was the backdrop for Game 6.

They threw the ball up, and suddenly Larry Bird was ubiquitous. On offense, he was a command post. You go here. You go there. I'll go where I want and shoot when I must. On defense, he was a one-man guerrilla campaign. He read the minds of the Houston players before they even had a thought. They couldn't throw a pass without him knowing. He got into a jump ball with Akeem Olajuwon, who could out-jump him by 2 feet, and Bird got the tap. There was nowhere he wasn't, and nothing he couldn't do.

By the half he had 16 points, 8 rebounds, 8 assists, 3 steals and the dirtiest, sweatiest, grimmest uniform since Pepper Martin hung 'em up. The Celtics were up

by 17. He would finish with 29 points, 11 rebounds and 12 assists. He's had better numbers. He's never had a bigger impact.

"My goal has always been control," he explains. "By control I mean doing a little bit of everything. Start at the defensive end. Rebound. Dribble the ball up. Hit a three. Get back on defense and help double-team somebody to make him throw the ball away. Come back to the offensive end and make a great pass. Rebound again. Throw a baseball pass for a score. Just one thing after the other."

Larry Bird was in full control on that June afternoon. He even had time to be frivolous, as he applied an exclamation point to his historic performance by tricky-dribbling around a startled Bill Walton ("He was in my way") into the deep left corner in order to swish a garbage-time three-pointer.

"I saw him take on five guys by himself," marveled Houston's Jim Petersen. "He's the best. At times, he doesn't even need teammates."

"Larry Bird is where he wants to be," said coach K.C. Jones. "He has reached the pinnacle of basketball."

It was true. He would never win another title. He would never play on a better team. He would never be so blissfully happy playing the game he loved. That game on June 8, 1986, was indeed the top of the Larry Bird mountaintop. Everything he stood for as an athlete was on display that June afternoon. He showed how a man with singular skill can utilize his physical and mental gifts to extract the utmost from four teammates, many of them skilled but none as skilled — or as driven — as he. He could not, as Petersen suggested, beat the Rockets by himself. (This, a Michael Jordan can, in fact, do.) What Larry Bird could do was organize a basketball team into a frighteningly efficient unit, and he could do it better than any man ever. He most surely did it that afternoon in Boston Garden.

He had known other triumphs, of course, and he would also enjoy many other spectacular afternoons and evenings. Basketball does not get any more dramatic, for example, than it did during The Great Shootout with Dominique Wilkins two years later. The Seventh Game of the Detroit series in 1987 wasn't bad, either.

But Larry Bird knows that something was going on that day that never had happened before. And never happened again. He played in 897 regular-season and 164 playoff games, but he was never as possessed of a certain indescribable spirit as he was that day. It was almost a transcendental state.

“That was the only game I thought I was totally prepared for,” he now admits. “As far as focus was concerned, none better. Never. I should have quit right there.”

You want to know the essence of Larry Bird? Watch that tape. Hands and feet in constant motion, eyes shifting — he was what Hubie Brown once called a “total menace,” and he did it on an afternoon when he was a mundane 8-for-17 shooter.

Larry Bird prided himself on his individual offense, of course. He took All Those Jump Shots during all those lonely hours in the gym for a purpose. But he never thought of himself as just a scorer. He thought of himself as someone who had the capacity to help a team wherever there was need. It didn’t bother him to shoot 4 for 16 if he had some rebounds and assists and played some good defense, and if, of course, his team won. As much as he worked on his shooting, he knew there would be nights when the ball’s will to bounce out was greater than his will to have it fly straight in. “I won’t lose no sleep over it,” he said after a 10-for-30 night in Washington. The next night he went 18 for 33 in Dallas and scored 50 points.

That’s why he remembers the Houston game more than The Dominique Game. The former encompassed the full range of his basketball expertise. The latter’s renown derived from shooting the basketball, and only that.

Coaches have always known the difference. Tom Heinsohn, still a coach at heart had studied Bird at Rookie Camp and came away declaring, “The drought is over.” Coaches saw something in Bird the casual fan could not appreciate. Why else would Mike Fratello begin his post-game soliloquy at the 1988 All-Star Game with a tribute to Larry Bird? Hadn’t Michael Jordan just scored 42 points to win the MVP? Yet here was Mike Fratello actually beginning his remarks by saying what an honor it had been to coach a man who had just compiled a stat line of 6 points, 7 rebounds and 2-for-8 shooting.

“Michael played well,” Fratello said, “and Dominique played well, but the thing that really impressed me was the way Larry Bird subjugated himself. From the standpoint of a coach, you’ve got to love seeing a man do all he did — come up with a couple of key steals, get back on defense continually and break up about five fast-break opportunities. To me, he was like an overseer of the game. He saw what we needed, and he acted accordingly.”

That could pretty much sum up the viewpoint of the folks back at Indiana State, where Larry Bird had taken the school from basketball obscurity in 1976 to an undefeated 1978-79 regular season and a berth in the 1979 NCAA championship game. Bird had arrived at the Terre Haute institution after beginning his collegiate career at Indiana. Bird was unhappy there almost from the start. The Bloomington campus was a small city of some 30,000 people, and hustle and bustle was too much for his shy, rural sensibilities. He felt socially displaced, and he hitch-hiked home after 24 days, never once having spoken with coach Bob Knight.

Bird had been a figure of some minor controversy during his senior year at Springs Valley High School in his home town of French Lick. As a 6-3 junior he had begun to blossom, spending most of his playing time passing the ball to seniors. He shot up to 6-7 by the start of his senior year, however, and presented coach Gary Holland with a complete basketball package. Holland knew what he had, even if no one else did. When the coach informed athletic director Larry Pritchett in the fall that “We have an All-Stater on our hands,” Pritchett’s reply was, “Larry’s that good, huh?” Holland saw that Bird was now a scorer and rebounder, in addition to being a superior passer. Despite the inferences of some haughty Indianapolis types that he hadn’t played against quality competition, Bird was indeed voted to the All-State team, a stature second only to canonization in the state of Indiana.

Bird’s basketball mentality was set in place. His vision of the game was completely pure. For reasons unknown to this day, all the team concepts, things every high school coach in America preaches to every one of his players, became rooted in Larry Bird’s mind. Most players nod politely to the coach and wind up doing what they please. Larry Bird absorbed every coaching homily as Gospel and set out to play a game coaches would revere.

Larry Bird's only goal was to win. That was primary. Winners paid the price. That was elementary. If the high school coach says you shoot free throws at 6:30 a.m., you shoot free throws at 6:30 a.m., maybe 6:15. If by getting this one loose ball you obtain a possession that might ultimately decide the outcome of a 1-point game, you go for the loose ball. No superstar in the history of the sport ever sacrificed his body in the pursuit of victory more than Larry Bird. If he hadn't, he'd still be out there today. Then again, if he hadn't, he wouldn't have been Larry Bird. We always had to take him on his terms, which is only right and proper when the terms involve the highest athletic standards.

Larry Bird didn't care about a lot of things. MVPs, for example. OK, he wanted one, just because he knew deep down he deserved it. But one was plenty, and even that didn't change him much. They flew him from French Lick, Ind., to Salt Lake City to pick up his first MVP in 1984, but only after he finished cutting the grass. His mother didn't even know why he was leaving town. A year later that trophy was sitting atop a refrigerator in the basement.

He would get two more, and the truth is he played well enough to receive five or six. He could have won the prize every year from 1979-80 through '87-88. He was really jobbed at least twice before he finally won the damn thing.

Everyone will have his or her private memories of Larry Bird, but it will be hard not to think of him in terms of passing. As great a shooter and scorer as he was — and 21,791 points attest to that reality — his ultimate calling card was the pass. When you watch the celebrated NBA Entertainment video, what really brings you up off the sofa are the passes: bounce passes, touchdown passes, behind-the-back passes, outlet passes, over-the-shoulder passes, lob passes, backhand passes, sidarm passes, lefthand passes, slap passes, basic redirection passes and even a punch pass or two. And who can forget him bouncing the ball to Kevin McHale through Jack Sikma's legs? (Surely, not Jack Sikma.)

Perhaps the most phenomenal pass was never seen again.

He came in with the reputation as a passer, but he just kept getting better and better, the way the ever-prescient Bill Fitch said he would. "When a guy's in a learning stage," Fitch said in September of '79, "his passing doesn't come to the

fore. He's worried about 'Where do I go?' and 'What am I supposed to do next?' instead of playing his normal game. He's not concerned with passing, as he will be later on."

Fitch's foresight was truly eerie. For Larry Bird kept exploring The Passing Game in an increasingly deep manner as his career went on. From one double-figures-assist game in his rookie year he expanded it to 17 in both '89-90 and '90-91. It is truly laughable to compare any other forward in history to Larry Bird as a passer. He finished with 140 career double-figures-assist games.

A passer can make a team, as Bird discovered in adolescence. Once Bird had the ball out front on a fast break, looked dead on at Dennis Johnson on his left and then flipped a no-look, alley-oop to a not-especially-surprised Robert Parish for a dunk.

"I didn't know if he saw me," explained The Chief, "but I figured I'd better get going."

In that same game Bird threw a knee-high Nolan Ryan job past three bewildered Knicks to McHale, who admitted he thought the ball would be going to DJ. This genius, sadly, Bird has taken with him, and we shall not be so thrilled ever again.

Nor are we likely to encounter anyone wearing a basketball uniform who will rival Larry Bird for sheer toughness. Red Auerbach drafted him on the basis of shooting, passing and rebounding skills. The Cigar Smoker had no idea he was also getting a player who would have been equally at home slipping on shoulder pads or lacing up skates.

It sometimes seemed as if nothing could get Larry Bird out of a ballgame. When he took that vicious elbow in the face from Harvey Catchings, he came back to finish the game. When he took the Dell Curry shot in the face, the one which resulted in his wearing goggles for the next four games, he came back in the game though suffering from double vision, and actually scored more points (18) while looking at two baskets than he had while looking at one (13).

His actions in the 1991 playoff series with Indiana actually defied common sense. His back pain was so excruciating that after compiling a triple-double in Game 1, he checked into New England Baptist Hospital for the evening. When he

smashed his face on the Garden floor while diving for a loose ball in the Fifth Game, he came back into the game and wound up being the central figure as the Celtics rallied to victory.

This mind-over-matter toughness extended to arcane playing conditions. Who, for example, will ever forget Bird's dominance in the 97-degree heat of the famed 1984 Heat Game against LA? While the Lakers gagged for air and referee Hugh Evans collapsed due to dehydration, Bird fired in 34 points, grabbed 17 rebounds, shot 15-for-20 and said it reminded him of a typical summer night back in French Lick and 'tweren't really no big deal.

But the world at large will most remember his offensive exploits, so let's talk about scoring for a spell. Larry Bird could score. How 'bout that 60-point night in New Orleans? How about those Hawk subs just about falling off the bench when Larry hits an outrageous three? How 'bout 32 points coming in one combined playing stretch of 14 minutes? "The amazing thing," reflected Jimmy Rodgers, "was that those points were coming out of the offense. That wasn't a lopsided game. He was scoring points that we needed."

Scoring Points That We Needed. Now that was a Bird specialty. Start with the 11 game-winning shots in the final five seconds of games, or the nine game-tyers in the same circumstance. Think of the other fabled big shots just outside that time boundary. The game-deciding pull-up banker against Philly in 1981 . . . The clever reverse follow-up to win Houston 1 in '81 . . . The icy fallaway with 16 seconds left to win LA 4 in '84 . . . And we are discussing only the tip of the iceberg, for sure.

How many times did Bird take over the fourth quarter to make sure it would never get to the final shot? Fifty? Seventy-five? At least. The Dominique Shootout is Exhibit A. Thanks to Larry's 9-for-10 fourth quarter, the game didn't come down to the final possession. And how about the little show he put on in the seventh game against Detroit in '87? Remember nailing those five in a row in the fourth as the score was going back and forth, including that you've-gotta-be-kidding-me lefty banker from 15 feet, the one Magic Johnson said had the Lakers howling in disbelief as they watched on TV in Santa Barbara, some 3,000 miles away?

He lived for fourth quarters, and he lived to take big shots. “Lots of guys will take the shot if the score is tied or if they’re up by 1,” he said, “but not so many want it if you’re down 1 or 2.” Bird always wanted it. Always. He always wanted the ball in his hands, anyway. If someone would be foolish enough to double-team, Larry would simply deliver the ball to the right person.

Larry’s offense was up there with anyone’s. He once scored 15 points against the Knicks in a shade over four minutes on four official field goal attempts. Even he doesn’t believe it, but it’s true. Ready? Illegal defense technical, 3-pointer, 3-pointer, two free throws, inside 3-point play, inside 3-point play. He was 4 for 4 from the floor, five free throws, 15 points. Thank you very much. And speaking of the Knicks, how about the time he was scoreless at the half and wound up with a 26-10-10 stat line? Have we mentioned the 11-for-11 first half in San Antonio? Or the 25-for-34 3-point run in 1986?

Those damnable injuries made his last five years a constant struggle. He may never have been better than during the exhibition season and first six games of the ‘87-88 season. In the second game he had 47 in Washington, including a game-tying 3 and a game-winning basket in OT. Two games later, he put up the first and only 40-point, 20-rebound game in Celtic history. (It was a reminder of his early youthful greatness on the boards. Forgotten now is the fact that he once had five offensive rebounds in four consecutive games). But three games after the Washington masterpiece, he ruined both Achilles’ tendons while making a behind-the-back move in Cleveland, and that led to the double heel surgery the following year. As for the back, you are already distressingly familiar with that scenario.

There were subsequent thunderstorms of Bird virtuosity here and there, the last of which came last March 15, when he reached back from God-knows-where with that 49-point, 14-rebound, 12-assist Rembrandt against Portland. There was the 14-assist Garden farewell Picasso against Cleveland in Game 6. There was even the absolute, positive and ultimate Last Hurrah, a turn-back-the-clock display of shooting and passing wizardry against Germany over in Barcelona.

By then, Bird knew it was over. He was playing only for the medal.

Given his druthers, he would have charted those last five years differently, but he's a pragmatist, and Larry Bird knows that all you can do in life is work hard and take what you get. He retires knowing things other players will never know, having an inner satisfaction a billion dollars couldn't buy. He'll actually know, for example, what it felt like to change the course of a human event. He'll know what it was like to be Larry Bird on June 8, 1986.

May 26, 1999

Pride of the Celtics

Ask him about Game 7 in 1969.

"Oh, you mean the balloon game?" he cackles, as only Bill Russell can.

"I knew they couldn't win it," he says. "I just knew it. At the beginning of the game, I told Bailey Howell it was literally impossible for them to beat us. It was just not possible for them to beat us."

Final score, in case you're a bit late to this saga: Boston 108, Los Angeles 106.

For two years as a collegian and 13 years as a professional, it very often was impossible for opponents to defeat a team anchored by the 6-foot-9-inch Bill Russell in any game that really mattered. In those 15 years, his teams won 13 championships. Toss in an Olympic gold medal in 1956, and an unshakable case can be made that William Felton Russell is the greatest team-sport athlete this country has ever known. That he is also one of the most independent thinkers and magnetic personalities in the history of American athletics thickens the plot immeasurably.

The man whose shamefully belated tribute will take place at the FleetCenter this evening is now 65 years old. He played his final game — yes, the "balloon" game — on May 5, 1969. In the interim, the NBA he left behind has grown from a mom-and-pop operation into a worldwide conglomerate with offices in Paris, London, Barcelona, Hong Kong, Taipei, Tokyo, Melbourne, and Mexico City. In the interim, we have seen Kareem, Dr. J, Magic, Larry, and Michael, not to mention Sir Charles and Shaq. What we have not seen is another Bill Russell.

Before Bill Russell came along, basketball was essentially a horizontal game played by landlocked Caucasians. And then . . .

“I could kick the net and jump up and touch the top of the backboard,” he points out. “I introduced the vertical game to basketball.”

There. He said it. I introduced the vertical game to basketball. It’s not a boast. It’s simply the truth. Russell brought an entirely new element to the game.

He’s proud of that, and who wouldn’t be? It must be a silent kick for this man to fire up his dish out there in his Mercer Island home to watch one of the many games he views each week and see all those pups playing in the manner of Russell, not that any of them can play with the effect of Russell. He knows they are playing his game, not George Mikan’s game.

You honor Russell when you tell him you appreciate how much he changed the game, but it is also very easy to anger him. That is done by writing the following sentence: Bill Russell was a great defensive basketball player.

“I know I was a great player,” he points out, “but I was not a great player on just one half of the court. Maybe my view is wrong, but I feel very strongly that to say I was a great defensive player diminishes my achievement. They say, ‘Oh, he was a great shot blocker,’ but, in reality, I was as good, if not better, offensively. I had a complete game.”

Stand back, here come the critics. What’s he talking about? He never even scored 20 points a game for a full NBA season. How many times did the Celtics go to Russell when they needed a basket? Didn’t his jersey number (6) pretty much equate to his range?

“Teams used to take 100 shots a game,” he explains. “Let’s say each team now takes 80. How long does it take to get off a shot? You take each man’s time with the ball in his hands, whether it’s dribbling, shooting, passing, or rebounding. What does it add up to? Four or five minutes? That leaves 43 or 44 minutes. Now, of those 43 or 44 minutes, what else is going on, and what can I do to affect the outcome of the game? Those are what I call the ‘subtle skills,’ and they are very important.

“People talk about my scoring. I could have scored more. Say I averaged 16 points a game in an average year. If I wanted to go to 19 or 21 a game, I’d have to take four or five more shots. That would have disrupted the offensive continuity of our team. My idea always was for the energy to flow from me to them. There was a period of time when we had seven double-figure scorers on our club. For me to score more would have required energy that I thought could have been better used elsewhere.”

Players came and players went during Russell’s 13 years as a Celtic, but there was always one constant: The offense, as well as the defense, revolved around him. He was a focal part of all the set plays, as a passer, pick-setter, or shooter. As much as Bob Cousy, John Havlicek, or Larry Bird, he had the wondrous capacity to take a quick mental snapshot and know where each of the other nine men on the floor were at any given time. And there was something else, too.

“The first year after I retired,” Russell continues, “John said he missed me more on offense than defense, and that was very gratifying. I could have run any of our plays from any spot on the floor. That was very important to me, and it came in very handy when I coached, because if one of the guys were having difficulty I could understand the problem. Also, if I knew all the plays from any spot on the floor, the coordination had to be better.”

He is not into the business of rating players. If you think Michael Jordan is the greatest NBA player, Russell says you are entitled to your opinion. However . . .

“I never say any one player is, or was, the best player,” he declares. “Everyone now says Michael Jordan is the best player. Michael Jordan is a friend of mine. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anyone better. But there were other great players. Before him there was Oscar, Pettit, Baylor, Wilt, Bird, and Magic. Times change. I say you can be as good as those guys, but not better.”

As for Bill Russell’s place on that list?

“I had some skills that were obvious and some skills that were not so obvious,” he says. “I think I had the best set of total skills.”

By that he means he believes he had the best combination of physical, mental, and emotional development. The physical part was self-evident. The competitiveness, likewise. But what set this man apart was the brain power. No one of even remotely comparable skill has ever approached the game with more mental agility and psychological shrewdness. He always knew what had to be done, and how to do it.

“One year [1969] we were playing Philly in the first round,” he recalls. “I blocked the first seven shots Luke Jackson took. My object was to take him out of the series, so they’d have to play another center who was far less efficient, and they would not be able to utilize one of their strengths.

“In the next series we played New York. They had beaten us something like six or seven times that year, and when I looked at the stats I saw that I had only averaged 7 points a game. In the first game of the series I took 23 shots, or something like that. What I had set out to do was disrupt the flow of their defense. Willis Reed loved to roam and help out, and during the season that’s exactly what he did. I had to let him know that in this series he would have to worry about me.”

He was then in his third, and final, season as a player-coach. It is a source of at least minor irritation to him that people tend to dismiss his coaching role during championship years 11 and 12. It is a further source of irritation that people have not given him proper credit for the job he did in Seattle during the early ‘70s. “I helped save that franchise,” he says matter-of-factly.

The truth is he is as proud of having coached the Celtics to the 1968 and 1969 championships as anything he has ever done. People seem to think that either Red Auerbach was some kind of silent Gopetto, or that the team somehow operated on automatic pilot. The Celtics had a coach, all right. He just happened to be their best player.

It is certainly true that the Celtics of the time were a veteran team that hardly needed a heaping dosage of X’s and O’s. They knew how to play the game. But someone had to select a final roster. Someone had to say what time the bus left. Someone had to make decisions on who played, and how much. Someone, in short, had to be in charge. Russell was very comfortable in that capacity.

“Every time we went to Cincinnati people wanted John to do this and do that, and he always tried to accommodate everybody,” says Russell. “The demands on him were unbelievable. He finally came to me and said, ‘Russ, what am I going to do? I can’t say no.’ I said, ‘Here’s what we’re going to do. If there’s something you really want to do, do it. If it’s something borderline, or something you’d rather not do, you come to me in front of the whole team and ask me for permission in front of the guys. I’ll say no. I’ll be the heavy.’”

Russell tried to accept individual player idiosyncracies - to a point.

“If you do something for someone once, they appreciate it,” Russell maintains. “Do it four or five times, and they come to expect it. Do it more than that, and they start to demand it. I tried to respond to requests just enough to keep the team functioning smoothly.”

He had, after all, studied at the foot of the master.

Russell has long been on record as saying that he never could have become the complete NBA force he was playing for any other coach. From the beginning, he understood Red and Red understood him.

“I had complete trust in Red,” Russell salutes. “It was off the scale. And the reason I had such trust was that whatever Red did was geared toward one thing: winning.”

He is equally grateful to a pair of early teammates for getting him acclimated properly to the NBA.

“After about 15 games I could get off any shot I wanted,” he says. “That’s because Bob Cousy and I were so coordinated. I will always be thankful to him for that. He was the first one to figure me out and understand how best to play with me.”

The true one-on-one mentor, meanwhile, was Arnie Risen, then in the 12th year of what would turn out to be a Hall of Fame career.

“No one could have been nicer or more helpful to someone who was there to take his job,” marvels Russell. “He said to me, ‘I’m going to be in your ear during

every timeout. I'll tell you how I would handle a situation. You may or may not want to do it that way. That will be up to you.' "

There is a belief that all great sports figures are defined by their chief rivals. Ruth had Cobb. Ali had Frazier. And Russell had Chamberlain.

It was the greatest subplot in the history of American team sport. For 10 years Bill Russell and Wilt Chamberlain waged war for both individual and team supremacy. Absent the other, either man would have had a far easier professional life, but neither would be as remotely fulfilled today.

"People say it was the greatest individual rivalry they've ever seen," Russell says, "and I agree with that. I have to laugh today. I'll turn on the TV and see the Knicks play the Lakers, and half the time Patrick isn't even guarding Shaq, and vice versa. Let me assure you that if either Wilt or Russ's coach had ever told one of them he couldn't guard the other guy, he would have lost that player forever!"

The challenge was greater for Russell.

"After I played him for the first time," Russell recalls, "I said, 'Let's see. He's 4 or 5 inches taller. He's 40 or 50 pounds heavier. His vertical leap is at least as good as mine. He can get up and down the floor as well as I can. And he's smart. The real problem with all this is that I have to show up!'" (Lots of cackling.)

"But I did have something going for me," he continues. "I was quicker — not faster — and I was much better laterally. So I realized that what I had to do in order to compete with this man was to make him move laterally as much as possible. I had to make him work for his points. There are 'hard' points and there are 'soft' points. Sometimes a guy can get 25 or 30 points and not hurt the other team. Another guy can get 10 points and kill you. I tried to make Wilt get 'soft' points."

He live two lives during those 13 years in Boston. His Celtics life was idyllic. He enjoyed playing basketball in general, and he truly enjoyed playing with those particular people for that particular coach. This is one reason he is willing to have his number formally re-retired.

“I am so proud to have my number up there with those great players,” he explains, “and I want everyone to know that. We are all friends for life.”

The time spent outside the Celtics’ cocoon wasn’t always so pleasant. He was — horrors! — a strident Negro in a city where deference was expected of its minority citizens, superstar athletes included. He chose not to sign autographs. He said more than once that all he owed the public was a great performance. He was dignified and aloof. He bought a house he liked in a town (Reading) where, as it turned out, he wasn’t wanted, and it was vandalized. He says he’d do it all again.

“I didn’t really care what they thought,” he insists. “I saw a house. I liked it. I bought it. I was the one making the mortgage payments. It didn’t matter to me what anyone thought.”

It still doesn’t.

“My citizenship,” he points out, “isn’t a gift. It’s a birthright.”

To some, he will always remain inscrutable. Why wouldn’t he allow the Celtics to retire his number properly 27 years ago? Why has he never set foot in the Hall of Fame? Why has he spent the past decade and a half refusing most interviews? Why is he consenting to this tribute, 30 years after his last game?

The last question is easiest to answer. The proceeds will go to the National Mentoring Partnership.

“There are no ‘other’ people’s kids in this country,” he says. “They’re the children of the nation, and I refuse to be at war with them. I’ll always do anything I can to make life better for a kid.”

Beyond that, he is mellowing, at least temporarily, although he’ll never use that word. There’s no statue, no plaque, no nothing to celebrate him in this town, and that’s just plain ridiculous. We’ve had far more than our share of athletic demigods in Boston, but none who ever accomplished more than Bill Russell.

And just to make sure you don’t think he’s gone completely soft, he makes it clear that he is all interviewed out. He has said what he has to say.

“This,” he cackles, “is a once-in-a-lifetime experience.”

Bill Russell is a once-in-a-lifetime man. And while he may reside in Seattle these days, he will, in truth, be coming home tonight. Why, just a couple of weeks ago, Russell was a guest on NBC when the following exchange took place.

Hannah Storm: “We have with us Hall of Famer Bill Russell.”

Bill Russell: “No, Hannah, make that Boston Celtic Bill Russell.”

Thanks, Bill, we needed that.

November 1, 2006

Auerbach’s spirit lives on

FALLS CHURCH, Va. - The rabbi said the family had directed that the ceremony be “brief” and “punctual.”

He read the 23d Psalm.

He read the Kaddish, or prayer of mourning.

The casket was lowered.

An American flag was placed inside.

The ceremonial dirt was thrown on the coffin by either a trowel or shovel.

And that was it.

No muss, no fuss, no frills.

How positively Auerbachian.

This was, after all, a man who arrived in Boston with seven basic offensive plays, plus options, and who quit coaching 16 years later still using those basic seven

plays, plus options. It wasn't, he figured, nuclear physics. It was basketball, and no one ever has known it better.

They came old and they came young. Some wore yarmulkes and some didn't. Men and women. Caucasians and people of color. But they were all united in love and admiration for a man who had affected them in ways that will last for the rest of their lives.

"He did so much for so many people," said Brookline and Northeastern's own Rick Weitzman, whom Red picked in the 10th round of the 1967 draft, and who impressed Red's immediate successor Bill Russell enough to earn a spot on the team, which led to a championship ring. "He gave me an opportunity when nobody else would have. And he was responsible for everything that has happened to me since."

It was time to say goodbye to a truly great American icon, a man who, had he not channeled his talents into basketball, could have been a Speaker of the House or corporate CEO. If ever a man was born to lead people, it was Arnold J. Auerbach.

Many had come to pay their respects the night before to the Joseph Gawler Funeral Home on Wisconsin Avenue. And now there were additional mourners, such as NBA commissioner David Stern, former NBA deputy commissioner Russ Granik, Kevin McHale (who needs no introduction), New Jersey Nets general manager Rod Thorn, and Washington Wizards general manager Ernie Grunfeld, who was so much the object of Red's affection at the 1977 draft that Red pounded his fist on the table in anger when the Bucks scooped up Grunfeld a pick before Boston's (hello, Cedric Maxwell).

But the gathering included more than just the NBA's high and mighty. There were plenty of just plain folk, too, including a man and his 12-year old son, dressed in a green Celtics sweatshirt.

Towering above the crowd were two large black men, one quite simply the greatest player Red, or anyone else, ever had, the other a fabulously successful college coach. Bill Russell and John Thompson were teammates for two seasons in the mid '60s, when, as the great Frank Deford once wrote, "There are two great spring rituals in Boston: Lent, and the Celtics in the playoffs."

The large black man from Oakland and the large black man from Washington each had fallen under the spell of the little Jewish man from Brooklyn, quoting him and re-quoting him, the former to enraptured audiences and the latter to the kind of young men his own son and successor as Georgetown coach, John Thompson III, had brought en masse to the funeral parlor the night before.

Red Auerbach is gone in body, but his feisty spirit lives on in the countless people who either played for him, worked for him, or studied him. The Auerbach basketball stories and the Auerbach bad driver stories and all the rest always will be told and retold, because they are either instructive or flat-out funny. But it turns out there were far more people who had good reason to mourn Red beyond those who made their lives from professional basketball. Now I'm hearing from people whose personal encounters with Red Auerbach resulted in everything from a pair of free tickets or a Celtics trinket to help in paying their medical bills. Red's Midas touch in finding employment for Celtic alumni was legendary, but that was hardly the end of his personal largesse. In fact, it was only the beginning.

I learned Monday night from Red's nephew Stuart Grossman that in his later years Red had become enamored of the jump-roping activity known as "Double Dutch," funding programs throughout New England. Who knew?

Red liked helping people, and he wasn't shy in dispensing advice. Mike Lupica of the New York Daily News remembers telling Red that his own dad, having reached 80, was reluctant to use a cane, which he obviously needed. Red, who had used one for years, demanded Ben Lupica's phone number. Red called him up, told him to stop being so foolish, and Ben Lupica now uses a cane.

He was a natural-born host. His office in the Old Garden was like a social club, but he really turned it up a notch if you went to his home. He was one of those people who kept offering you candy or another drink every five minutes. And he absolutely always inquired about your kids. I mean, always.

Did you want to get on his bad side? No, you didn't. Ask Maxwell, who Red thought was not diligent enough in rehabbing his knee during the '84-85 season, and who was then dispatched when the season was over to NBA Siberia (i.e. the Los Angeles Clippers). Max was on the outs for 20 years before Red relented and agreed

to have Maxwell's No. 31 go up in the rafters. "I go see him," Max recalls, "and he taps me on the knee and says, 'All is forgiven.' I'm thinking, 'Forgiven? Wait a minute; he traded me!'"

OK, so he had a long memory.

But it's his generous nature that will be remembered. Weitzman is hardly the only Celtic alum who feels a debt of gratitude to the old coach. Red was helping out people 55 years ago. He put in a good word for Bones McKinney to get the Wake Forest job, for example, and a few years later Bones repaid him by tipping him off to a player at a little-known college he thought Red should consider drafting. The player was Sam Jones, and he was the first No. 1 pick in either football or basketball to come from a historically black college. Yup, another Red Auerbach first. Red and race and being ahead of the curve; there's a book in that one.

It's all past tense now, and his countless disciples are left to carry on. "The rabbis always say the best part of these graveside services is the throwing of the dirt," mused David Stern, "because that's one favor you can't return."

Wanna bet?

June 19, 2008

Greatest of the Green

This was a championship for a Lost Generation of Boston Celtics fans.

These are people for whom Bill Russell, the greatest winner in American team sports, and Bob Cousy, the legendary "Houdini of the Hardwood," are like figures out of King Arthur's tales. These are people for whom John Havlicek, basketball's consummate "sixth man," and Dave Cowens, the mercurial redheaded center, are as personally relevant as comic book characters. These are people for whom even the great Larry Bird is just some guy wearing short-shorts who pops up occasionally on ESPN Classic.

These are the people who were too young to mourn fallen soldiers Reggie Lewis and Len Bias. These are the people who do not think hard-bodied young women gyrating in the interests of Celtics Green is a sacrilege. These are people who could not imagine entering an arena that did not have a Jumbotron and music and fireworks and who could not possibly imagine that, once upon a time, a portly organist named John Kiley stirred the Boston Garden crowd by playing the “Mexican Hat Dance.”

These are the people who were either very sad or very angry when general manager Danny Ainge first traded Antoine Walker, a player their elders generally loathed. These are the people who text instant observations to friends in Singapore. And these are the people who hungered for a Celtics championship they could call their own, one accomplished in their building with their heroes.

Celtics championship No. 17 belongs to them.

The Celtics began winning championships in the Eisenhower Administration with players born either before or during the Great Depression. They continued winning through the Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon and Reagan administrations before hitting a snag following the 1986 championship. Now, after a 22-year wait, they have won a championship under the stewardship of George Bush with players born after man first walked on the moon.

This is a remarkable team, put together in record time by Ainge, a member of the 1984 and 1986 championship teams, and coached by Glenn “Doc” Rivers, a 13-year NBA veteran who had his heart broken on more than one occasion by some of those aforementioned championship teams. It has been built around the considerable talents of three great veterans — captain Paul Pierce, Kevin Garnett, and Ray Allen, and brilliantly augmented by a beguiling combination of experienced, savvy players and eager, youthful ones.

And it is one of the great Celtics teams of all-time. Here’s one man’s list of the best in Green.

- - -

10. 1968-69

Record: 48-34

Playoff record: 12-6

Result: Championship

The Last Hurrah for both Russell and the great Sam Jones. After pacing themselves in the regular season, the ancient Celtics (the starting five averaged 32 years of age) knocked off favored Philadelphia, New York, and, finally, star-laden Los Angeles, winning the famous Game 7 in the Fabulous Forum and in so doing keeping celebratory balloons fastened to the ceiling.

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9. 1986-87

Record: 59-23

Playoff record: 13-10

Result: Lost in Finals

The Iron Man five of Bird, Kevin McHale, Robert Parish, Dennis Johnson, and Ainge did not have sufficient bench support to get by the mighty Lakers, losing the pivotal Game 4 to the storied Magic Johnson “junior, junior sky hook.” No Celtic team ever had more sheer heart.

- - -

8. 1956-57

Record: 44-28

Playoff record: 7-3

Result: Championship

Red Auerbach’s personal favorite title, simply because it was the first. Rookies Russell (25 points, 32 rebounds) and Tom Heinsohn (37 points, 23 rebounds) carried the team to an epic double-overtime seventh game victory over the St. Louis Hawks. Many old-timey Celtics fans went to their graves swearing this was the greatest game they’d ever seen.

- - -

7. 1984-85

Record: 63-19

Playoff record: 13-8

Result: Lost in Finals

It was the second of Bird's three consecutive MVP award seasons, and the only reason the Celtics did not win the championship that season was the fact that the Lakers were supremely motivated, a tad deeper, and fueled by a 38-year old legend named Kareem Abdul-Jabbar. The Lakers were 1; the Celtics were 1A.

- - -

6. 1962-63

Record: 58-22

Playoff record: 8-5

Result: Championship

The incomparable Russell headed a roster that included a record eight Hall of Fame players. It was the last of Cousy's six championships and the first of Havlicek's eight.

- - -

5. 1964-65

Record: 62-18

Playoff record: 8-4

Result: Championship

Russell was at his peak convergence of physical ability, knowledge, and desire. After surviving a scare from the 76ers when it wasn't over until "Havlicek Stole the Ball," they annihilated LA.

- - -

4. 1983-84

Record: 62-20

Playoff record: 15-8

Result: Championship

No better physically than the '84-85 team, this squad simply out-toughed the Lakers to win the championship. The Lakers never allowed this to happen again.

3. 1972-73

Record: 68-14

Playoff record: 7-6

Result: Lost in conference finals

Ah, what might have been. Havlicek injured his shoulder in Game 3 of the conference finals against the Knicks. The Knicks easily dispatched LA in 5; a healthy Celtics team would have swept them.

2. 2007-08

Record: 66-16

Playoff record: 16-10

Result: Championship

Won opening game by 20 and never looked back, ending with 39-point humiliation of the Lakers to win the title. It would be very interesting to see if these players could impose their defensive will on their '85-86 counterparts as easily as they did on their '07-08 foes.

1. 1985-86

Record: 67-15

Playoff record: 15-3

Result: Championship

Bird was at his peak. The greatest team ever if you consider no other club has ever brought anything resembling a healthy Bill Walton off the bench. This squad was 50-1 at home, regular season and playoffs combined. This Lost Generation of Celtics fans need no longer slap on their headphones and begin rolling their eyes when the smug followers of champions 1 through 16 begin rhapsodizing about the virtues of their favorite Celtics squads of yore. Their team, No. 17, can compete with any that has ever worn the Green and White.

Red Sox

February 28, 1990

Lessons of family and spirit shine through the sadness

Dear Tony,

You would have loved this touch. About 15 minutes before the funeral Mass, this big guy comes sauntering up the church steps. He was wearing a trench coat and - get this - a Red Sox cap. Who else but Dave Cowens?

I asked him if you two had ever met. "No," he replied. "I'm here out of respect for the family. The love and care and support they gave Tony impressed me very much. I would have to say that Tony C was a very special sports story in Boston."

Boy, he got that right, both about the family and the fact that you were something unique around here. Your family taught us all a lesson about love and loyalty and selflessness, and I'm going to be honest with you. When you and your brother Billy were in your heyday, a lot of people in this town mocked the family. They kept hearing about Richie and Sal and Teresa and they thought maybe you were all getting a little too carried away with each other. Turns out it was no act. You people simply knew what being a family was all about. Since most people don't, it doesn't take long before latent jealousy turns into bitterness.

But the way your family came to your aid after what happened back in '82 grabbed everyone and made the critics feel foolish. A guy like Dave Cowens, who's always been tuned into the what's what of relationships, picked up on that. It didn't surprise me at all to see Dave Cowens show up to say goodbye. Too bad you couldn't have seen him in the hat.

And it's also too bad he couldn't have seen you in your prime. I was telling him about how you were still living in your own house when you were a Red Sox rookie. Instead of getting up, eating breakfast and going off to school, you were getting up,

eating breakfast and heading off to Fenway to face Mudcat Grant. You were living out some Frank Capra vision of major league baseball, and we were all envious of you and happy for you at the same time.

Bishop John Mulcahy tried to put the thing in perspective for us yesterday. “Tony did what God wanted him to do,” he said. “God gives special talents to many people, and it’s obvious that He gave to Tony C a singular, unique talent of being able to hit a baseball. God gives those talents to people so they can make other people happy.” There is no doubt you made people very happy, the only exception being lefthanders with mediocre stuff. I doubt they considered their encounters with you to be very pleasant.

For 22 years, your life was pretty sweet, but the real you came out after you took that pitch in the face. Let’s face it; you had been the Wonder Boy, the guy who had always just shown up and been the best kid on the field, and no one knew how you’d react to adversity. What we discovered was a fighter’s instinct. How you ever managed to hit 36 homers and drive in 116 runs in 1970 while focusing with one eye will always remain one of baseball’s great mysteries. I can only imagine how shattered you must have been when Dick O’Connell traded you to the Angels a year later. How were you going to get a Kelly’s Roast Beef sandwich in Anaheim?

But you never knocked O’Connell, not even four years later when you were sitting in a dingy locker room in Pawtucket’s McCoy Stadium near the end of your second comeback. This was after you had been out of baseball 3 1/2 years, and after you had battled your way back into the Opening Day lineup of the ‘75 season, and after you had been cut by the big club. You thanked O’Connell for the opportunity, and do you know what else you said?

You said, “I’m lucky. I have a new house and a new car. Look, I grew up when I went to Vietnam for 30 days with the USO. How the hell can I go around complaining?”

Of course, you never got a chance to complain after the heart attack in ‘82, because that vicious blow disabled you completely. You never got a chance to express what your family and your public thought out loud; namely, why? At your

funeral Mass yesterday, Rev. Dominic Menna offered the only answer. “Suffering,” he told us, “is a mystery.”

You certainly went out in style. It was a gorgeous winter’s New England morning, and St. Anthony’s has got to be the Yankee Stadium of churches. It’s big and undeniably beautiful. And you should have heard the singing! A woman named Judy Levis did something I’ve never heard before. She took hymns and, without calling attention to herself, turned them into just plain beautiful songs of faith and inspiration. She was like a respectful cabaret singer. Hope St. Anthony’s has her signed to a long-term, you know what I mean?

Meanwhile, all we can do is assume that the Big Guy has signed you to a real long-term pact, giving you eternal space in a lineup with a good leadoff man and some solid protection behind you in the No. 5 spot. I’m pretty certain that’s the way it’s going to be, Tony, because we all heard it in the First Reading, which was taken from the Book of Wisdom. I know the author had to be thinking of you when he wrote this one:

The souls of the just are in the hands of God, and no torment shall touch them.

Regards, Bob



January 29, 1994

Feller one of a kind

The Homogenization of America has taken another gigantic leap forward. Sherm Feller is dead.

Sherm was an American/Boston/Roxbury original. I may not be any good at predicting sporting events, but here's one statement I know will come true: We will not be seeing any more Sherman Fellers.

Show me another man who was buddy-buddy with both Nat King Cole and Freddy Lynn; who knew how to get a traffic ticket fixed or (I have not the slightest doubt) a leg broken; who knew where every political, show biz and athletic body in Greater Boston over the past 50 years is buried; who started doing a radio talk show as early as 1941 (he always claimed to be America's first such creature, and no one ever disputed it); who wrote one song that crashed the Top 10 and which is resurrected faithfully every year ("It's Summertime, Summertime") and another

song that is a fixture in the Boston Pops Christmas repertoire (“Snow, Snow, Beautiful Snow”); who had the entree to place a bet or get a fantastic meal at 4 a.m. in his beloved Chinatown; who was in the top one-100th of one percentile of Greatest American Story Tellers; and who, finally, had his own distinct (I won’t say inimitable because Jon Miller had him cold) and unforgettable style as Fenway Park public address announcer for the past 26 years.

Central Casting just called. They regret to say they will not be sending over any more Sherm Fellers.

Sherm Feller lived his life on the edge for every one of his 75 years. Money to Sherm was a vehicle for a good time of the moment; nothing more and nothing less. The Good Life to Sherm Feller was telling a story about some judge in Roxbury or a night on the town with Erroll Garner or Billie Holiday, grabbing a late meal at the Four Seas (has a restaurant ever considered posting a menu at half-staff?) or standing at the rail rooting home a long shot at Suffolk. And baseball. The Fenway gig wasn’t a job for Sherm. It was a privilege and a fantasy fulfilled.

Sherm’s PA style did not come from the Connecticut School of Broadcasting catalog. Sherm’s approach was Sherm’s alone. He was the Count Basie of PA men, firm in the belief that for every two words, there should be a pause. “Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls,” he would start. About 10 seconds later, you’d hear, “. . . Good afternoon and welcome to Fenway Park for an 8-second pause . . . today’s game between the Boston Red Sox and 11-second pause . . . the New York Yankees.”

And whereas every other announcer in baseball has an unbreakable routine when giving the lineups, Sherman made it up every night. In the course of one lineup announcement, he might go number, name, position for one man, name, position and “he wears No. 2” for the second man, back to the original sequence for the third man and then to some other approach for the fourth. Only Sherm could get away with this.

Sherman was not a master of detail. There are times when the PA man has very specific announcements management wants him to make, particularly when there is a pregame ceremony on the field. Sherm might have been busy telling someone a

story about the night he took the Dorsey Brothers to the after-hours joint and etc. etc., etc., while Ken Coleman, or somebody, was standing down on the field awaiting Sherman's introduction. I have vivid memories of former Red Sox public relations director Bill Crowley, his face reddening, swearing at Sherman and looking as if he were ready to dive out of the press box because Sherm wasn't following orders. But Sherman never sweated the small stuff.

Sherman was a Character with a Capital C, and we don't have many left in this town. Oh, there's Dapper, for sure, but go ahead, name another one of those larger-than-life figures who lived through the Depression and fought in World War II and went through the rest of their lives grabbing center stage at every gathering, large and small. I know we've lost just about every one of the Old Guard peripheral personalities who made the Boston sports world unique.

The next Red Sox PA announcer will have a fine voice, I'm sure (but not as resonant as Sherman's, I'm also sure), and he will follow management orders, which Sherman seldom did. He'll even have an orderly sequence when he reads the starting lineups. But he won't be able to sneak anyone into Chinatown for a meal in the wee smalls and he won't have a story about the time his car broke down when he was taking Nat King Cole to the airport and he won't be asking me my choice in the NBA Finals so he can get a little action going in a sport he doesn't know much about and he won't be squiring Harry Ellis Dickson around the press box a couple of times a year, either.

Take care, Sherm. I hope wherever you are, it's always "Summertime, Summertime," the daily double pays at least 40 bucks and the won-ton soup is served just the way you like it.

September 12, 1999

Observers still awestruck

PEDRO'S CONQUERED TERRITORY, USA - It is the sober light of the Day After. You are David Cone. You have been quoted as speaking of the Friday night Pedro Martinez performance in apocalyptic terms. You have now had the benefit of a good night's sleep. Like members of Congress, who are permitted to alter remarks

to their satisfaction before they are committed to history in the Congressional Record, you are now being offered an opportunity to rethink, or, as Roger Clemens would say, to “re-correct” yourself for the official Baseball Record.

That said, David Cone, what is your final and unalterable reflection on Pedro’s one-hit, 17-strikeout embarrassment of the Yankees?

“It was the best-pitched game I’ve ever seen,” asserts the great Yankee hurler.

“Excluding my perfect game, of course,” jokes Cone.

That, however, proves to be a throwaway line, for Cone really does believe Pedro’s masterpiece was a more dominant pitching display than his 27-up, 27-down dispatch of the Montreal Expos on July 18.

“I’ve never seen anything better,” reiterates Cone. “He had three completely dominant pitches: a great fastball, a knee-buckling curve, and a parachute changeup. Other than that, what else do you need?”

To Cone’s way of thinking, Pedro’s repertoire is nothing less than unfair.

“I saw [Orel] Hershisser’s great year in ‘88, and he basically did it with one pitch, a hard sinker,” says Cone. “Nolan Ryan had a fastball and a curve. Mike Scott, when he was at his peak, had a fastball and a splitter. Dwight Gooden was another one with a fastball and a curve. Pedro has three great pitches.”

Let’s talk context. Roger Clemens fanned 20 Seattle Mariners in late April 1986. The Mariners turned out to be the strike-outingest team anyone had ever seen. Ten years later, Roger Clemens fanned 20 Detroit Tigers in a meaningless late September game while they were en route to establishing a new whiff standard. What Pedro Martinez did the night before last was on an entirely different plateau.

“He did it here, in Yankee Stadium, in a pennant race, when the team really needed a win,” reminds Cone, who is always capable of seeing the Big Picture.

Speaking of the Big Picture, the time has come to slot Pedro in the MVP race. The Cy Young race is over, of course. With 21 wins, a 2.20 ERA, and 274

strikeouts, he has nailed down the pitching triple crown with three weeks to go. No, really. He can't lose. He's got five more wins and 104 more strikeouts than anyone. His ERA edge of damn near a full run per nine innings (Cone is second with 3.10) may be the most astonishing lead of all. Throw in his league-leading .207 opponents' batting average and there really is nothing else anyone needs to know. Pedro Martinez will win his second Cy Young Award.

The MVP award is a different matter. Some people - OK, me - are put off by the idea of pitchers winning the MVP. The Cy Young Award should be their ultimate honor. How can you compare the kumquat that is an everyday player with the squash that is a pitcher? Others - OK, most everyone else - say it's not that difficult when you ask yourself the following question: Where would the team be without him?

Let us, as they say, do the math. The Red Sox are plus-20 for the season. Pedro is plus-17. This may not quite be the 1972 Phillies/Steve Carlton discrepancy (minus-44/plus-17), but it is impressive and meaningful and about as good an argument as any one player in the American League has when the simple subject under discussion is his inherent value to his team. I'm still a guy who believes the MVP should go to the (Everyday) Player of the Year, but I'm not voting and so I am here to predict that Pedro wins 'em both.

"I'm a pitcher," says Cone, "and I understand the debate. But I think it's pretty clear. You take Pedro away from Boston, and where are they? That sounds like an MVP to me."

This all presupposes more superb Pedro outings. Given that he is 4-0 with a 0.58 ERA in his last four starts (not to mention 11 hits allowed in 31 innings), that's practically a given, isn't it? There haven't been too many dead spots in his spectacular season. And consider this: With the DL stint, he's actually saved a little wear and tear on his arm.

"Absolutely," confirms Cone. "I'm down to pitching once a week now, and I can tell the difference. I feel much fresher."

Cone is 36. Pedro is not yet 28 (Oct. 25). The veteran admits to being a bit envious of the prime-of-lifer.

“I was kidding him at the All-Star Game,” Cone says. “I said, ‘Hey, it’s easy being you. Anybody can win when they throw 97. Come and see me in seven years or so, and let’s see if you can win when you’re throwing 83.’ ”

The problem for hitters, as Cone reminds us, is that Pedro Martinez does a lot more than throw in the mid 90s. Exhibit A was a Ricky Ledee at-bat in the eighth inning Friday. This time the raconteur is Dan Duquette.

“He started him off with two changeups on the outside,” recalls the GM. “Then a curveball to go 1-and-2. If you’re Ledee, what do you look for now? Pedro just blows a fastball by him.”

Three pitches. A mid-90s fastball. The “knee-buckling curve.” The “parachute changeup.” Superb control. Top-drawer competitive instincts. Off-the-scale baseball intelligence. Only one man on earth has all this, and it’s Pedro Martinez, the best pitcher in baseball.

October 17, 2003

Misery has more company

NEW YORK - The reward for all that fidelity will surely come in another life. There is no indication it will ever materialize in this one.

With five outs to go, it was there. It was tangible. The Red Sox were going to beat the Yankees. They were going to the World Series, and, of course, they were going to win it. The “Cowboy Up” bunch was the team of every Red Sox fan’s dreams, a group capable of ignoring the history and playing the game right at the same time.

But the story never, ever changes. Whatever the formula is, the Red Sox still do not have it. Pedro Martinez couldn’t hold leads of 4-0 and 5-2, and the Red Sox couldn’t score against Mariano Rivera. And in the cruelest twist of fate this series could possibly have provided, Tim Wakefield, unquestionably the team’s MVP in this series, threw one pitch in the bottom of the 11th and Aaron Boone hit it in the left-field seats.

Yanks 6, Sox 5, and let the crying begin.

Thus we have another gigantic log to toss on that Eternal Flame of Red Sox Misery. This lovable, gritty team seemed to have the Right Stuff, with a season-long run of comeback wins. They came to New York needing to win two, and they came within five precious outs of doing so. The problem is the Pedro Martinez of 2003 is not the Pedro Martinez of 1999. Check that: The problem was Grady Little thought the Pedro Martinez of 2003 is the Pedro Martinez of 1999.

He is not.

Pedro's heart is willing, but the flesh isn't what it was at his peak. His mortality was apparent as early as the seventh inning, when Jorge Posada hit one hard to center, Jason Giambi hit the second of his two home runs over the center-field fence, and Karim Garcia lined a hard single to right. He got out of the inning and had thrown 100 pitches.

Grady had a choice, and his decision was to stay with Pedro. It was a bad one. Before he could get Pedro out of the game in the eighth inning, three runs were in and the score was tied.

"Pedro Martinez has been our man all year long in situations just like this," said Little. "He's the man we want on the mound, more than anyone in our bullpen."

Everybody's going to blame Little for everything, I'm sure, but this is never an easy decision, and there was a lot more to this game than pulling Pedro or not pulling Pedro. Baseball is a lot more complex than that.

Take, for example, the failure to capitalize on a juicy situation in the fourth. Kevin Millar led off the inning with a home run to make it 4-0. Then, with men on first and third - on a perfectly executed hit-and-run, if you can believe that - the Red Sox were in a position to blow the game open when Joe Torre summoned Mike Mussina from the pen for his first relief appearance of a career that has had exactly 400 starts. The Moose, who has been slammed by the New York press for coming up small in the postseason while wearing a Yankee uniform, fanned Jason Varitek and induced Johnny Damon to hit into an inning-ending 6-3 double play.

“That was the turning point for me,” Torre said. “It kept us there. You feel like you’re getting your brains beat out, but you look at the scoreboard and you’re still at arm’s length.”

Mussina worked three scoreless innings. The relay team just kept coming and coming. Felix Heredia, Jeff Nelson, even David Wells. Wells was brought in to face David Ortiz and saw his first pitch, a changeup that dipped down and in, blasted over the right-field fence to make it 5-2.

The Red Sox’ nightly strategy against the Yankees is always the same: Get a lead and keep Mariano Rivera out of the game. They were on their way to doing just that when Pedro imploded in the eighth, giving up a double to Derek Jeter, a single to Bernie Williams, a ground-rule double to Hideki Matsui, and, finally, a bloop double to center by Posada.

Enter Rivera, and while he wasn’t untouchable, he was good enough. Before the game, Torre had been asked if he would even consider using Rivera for more than two innings and he said he doubted it very much, that he would do nothing to risk Rivera’s health. So what happened? Rivera pitched a scoreless ninth, a scoreless 10th, and a scoreless 11th. File that under the heading of a manager and a closer doing what they had to do.

It was a truly great game and a truly great series, but no one in Boston wants to hear that. They would gladly have taken four dull victories, but dull was never going to be the phrase associated with any game these teams were going to play. In the 100-year history of Boston-New York American League competition, this was undoubtedly the greatest collection of ballgames. They wound up playing a major league-record 26 times, with New York winning 14, Boston winning 12, and the deciding game, for the American League pennant, lasting into the 11th inning.

“I think the Boston fans should be proud of their ball club,” Torre said. “They were the toughest team we’ve faced in my eight years here.”

The Red Sox always lose in great games. The 1975 World Series was an epic. The Bucky Dent Game was an epic. The 1986 World Series was a keeper. That’s the

point. The Red Sox always play in these things, but they never wind up pouring the champagne.

Seriously. Would it spoil some vast eternal plan if the Red Sox could win one?

August 22, 2006

Warning: These truths may hurt

You want the truth?

OK. Let's see if you can handle the truth.

The truth is that at present the Red Sox have two reliable pitchers, Curt Schilling and Jonathan Papelbon.

The truth is that, while you cannot blame everything on not having Jason Varitek, you cannot ignore his loss, either. They are 6-15 in his absence. There is some connection.

The truth is that there has been no legitimate No. 5 hitter on this team all season. It wasn't Varitek and it wasn't Trot Nixon. It most certainly is not Kevin Youkilis. It isn't Mike Lowell. The guy's not quite ready yet, but the closest thing would be Wily Mo Pena, and the truth is that he generally bats right where any decent team currently would put him: seventh.

The truth is that Johnny Damon was an enormous loss for the Red Sox and a tremendous addition to the Yankees. Over and above his obvious offensive skills, he has an irreplaceable personality. People who know the Yankees well say they have never before known such a relaxed Yankee clubhouse, and they attribute it all to the daily presence of Damon. He will not be playing center field when his current Yankee contract expires, but he will be in the lineup somewhere. They consider him money well spent (as only they could).

The truth is that Coco Crisp is not the player the Red Sox thought he was. He was enticing because he appeared to be getting better at the plate with each passing year, and the expectation was that further improvement was a given. Well, it wasn't,

and that's not a strange baseball occurrence, especially when someone is changing teams. My guess is that he will be a much more productive player next year, but it's foolish to think he's going to be Johnny Damon. Fans cannot hold him to that standard.

The truth is that Josh Beckett is a mystery. Is he stupid? Is he stubborn? Is he lacking in focus? Is he a National League fraud? I do not know for sure what the answer is, but if someone can't find the solution to his problem, he will represent a monumental miscalculation and a colossal waste of money. His second-half performance has been pathetic.

The truth is that Theo Epstein whiffed on his big bullpen acquisitions. Julian Tavaraz and Rudy Seanez were each coming off very good seasons. Tavaraz had been a reliable middle guy for several seasons, while Seanez, long one of the great teases in baseball, had posted a career year in San Diego (7-1, 2.69, 84 K's and 22 walks). I don't have to tell you how it's turned out.

The truth is that everyone has to get old sometime and it appears that Mike Timlin's time has come. Some trace it to the World Baseball Classic in the spring. Maybe. I really don't know. I do know that when he gets up in that bullpen now, Red Sox fans get nervous, and with good reason. I also know that it was beyond stupid for a 16-year veteran to throw his offense under the bus as Timlin did early last week. You think a few guys in that clubhouse weren't smirking when he blew the second game last Friday night?

The truth is that if you're going to go through most of the season without a major league lefty in your bullpen, you'd better have a very good reason. You'd better have a righty who is exceptionally tough on lefties, and the only person on the Sox roster who could answer that description was Keith Foulke, and then only when he is at the very peak of his game. I really don't know why the Red Sox allowed Mike Myers to skip town, and I would be saying that even if he hadn't K'd Big Papi with his 80-m.p.h. heater in a key situation yesterday. "Mike Myers is the consummate pro," said Joe Torre afterward, and I would second that notion.

The truth is that the Red Sox made their big move against the (inferior) National League, and they weren't alone. The Red Sox, Tigers, White Sox, and Twins were a

combined 61-11 against the NL. I know that looks ridiculous, but it's the gospel truth. The Red Sox are now officially .500 in their own league. Now we must accept the fact that they were never really that good.

The truth is that this has been a very good year to be a Yankee fan. They lost Gary Sheffield and Hideki Matsui within two weeks in the spring, they also lost the scary-good Robinson Cano for about six weeks, and they had concurrent problems with their starting pitching. They had to wait out a Red Sox surge, knowing there was plenty of time in a long, long season to pull themselves together. In its present form, it is a thoroughly likeable and rootable team.

The truth is that the only team in baseball that could take on the Bobby Abreu contract was the team that did so. And while people knew he was good, no one foresaw him having this much of an effect on the rest of the lineup. A lineup that already had some patient hitters now has become a pitcher's nightmare. Schilling might have gone nine Sunday night if he didn't need 41 pitches to get six outs during the scoreless first and second innings.

The truth is that Brian Cashman's moves in getting Scott Proctor, Ron Villone, and Kyle Farnsworth to form his setup corps are now looking every bit as good as Theo's moves now look bad. You don't see any Craig Hansens or Manny Delcarmens doing their OJT in the middle of a pennant race because the big-money vets have been completely inadequate.

The truth is that Derek Jeter is submitting an MVP season. When the Yankees were going through their problems, the one person they always could count on was Jeter. He is both highly skilled and single-minded in the pursuit of victory. He is the last man any Red Sox fan should ever want to see up in any meaningful situation. There was enough evidence of that in this series.

The truth is that the Yankees lost two very good players in Sheffield and Matsui, but they retained such players as Damon, Jeter, Jason Giambi, Abreu, and Alex Rodriguez, none of whom makes less than \$13 million a year. That's before you get to Randy Johnson. See any other teams around like that?

The truth is that, in addition to the big-money guys, the Yankees in the space of a year presented for the perusal of their fans the likes of Chien-Ming Wang, Cano, and Melky Cabrera from their farm system. Give them credit.

The truth is that this is not a good time to be Theo Epstein. For two years running, he has been unable to construct a viable pitching rotation. (We haven't mentioned Matt Clement, a very nice guy; no one is in a hurry to see him come back, because it's clear he wasn't cut out for Boston.) Theo was cut one year of afterglow slack, but overheated fans, already in a bloodthirsty mood, are downright rebellious now that the Yankees have humiliated their team with a five-game sweep.

The truth is that the essential Yankee/Red Sox dynamics haven't changed, no matter what happened in the fall of 2004. The Red Sox have a lot of money, but the Yankees HAVE A LOT OF MONEY. The real story is that the Yankees have not won since 2000. They're winless in this century. People around here should focus more on that. The Yankees have some splainin' to do.

The truth is that in this perverted sports climate, the other team is never just allowed to be better, even for a day, let alone a series or a season. No, no. Blame must be affixed. Heads must be severed.

Once upon a time, losing brought a brief period of sorrow. Now it brings rage. The rest of the season, I fear, will not be much fun.

The truth is we need to sit down and figure out what sports are all about. We've lost our way.

August 25, 2006

It's not about who's to blame

I appeared to strike a chord in the readership earlier this week by writing the following: "The truth is we need to sit down and figure what sports are all about. We've lost our way."

It was in reference to the Yankees' infamous five-game sweep of the Red Sox, and the need of many, as I saw it, to find someone to blame for all this, rather than to accept it as a pure athletic situation in which one team simply performed better than another over a period, in this case four days. As always, there are plenty of people who are quite unhappy with the manager, but at present people are displeased in much greater numbers with general manager Theo Epstein, who, in their view, either allowed to get away, traded away, or traded for the wrong people in the last two offseasons and who then angered them further by not putting the Mercurochrome bunny on all this by making a cure-all trade at the July 31 deadline.

Scrutiny of a general manager is not new, but the interpretation of his action or inaction, as the case may be, is now different. Theo has brought some of the criticism on himself because he can't be oblivious to this the events of last offseason were without precedent in the history of American sport. (I'm trying with great difficulty to picture Branch Rickey, Red Auerbach, or Dick O'Connell in a gorilla suit.) But the rest of it is management's (i.e. Larry Lucchino's) fault for botching the contract negotiations, which, you can be 100 percent certain, Epstein never wanted to be even remotely public.

My God, I'm doing it, aren't I? I'm assigning "blame." Anyway, the result of all that foolishness was that Theo emerged in the public view as an irreplaceable entity in the Red Sox scheme of things. If he's that smart, people reasoned, then surely he will do all the right things to ensure that we conquer the Evil Empire.

Obviously, he didn't. And now people are e-mailing to say that he is, among other things, cocky, arrogant, delusionary, egotistical, and overrated. And they are not merely disappointed. They are angry. How dare he spoil their summah!

In other words, it's personal. And I am here to say that it didn't used to be personal. It just was.

OK, let's talk fandom.

I know about being a fan. I fell in love with the 1954 New York Giants (especially Willie Mays), and I rooted for them even after they left for San Francisco. I got a Giants jacket as a confirmation gift. I tossed a shoe out of the

dormitory window when I heard they had traded Orlando Cepeda to the Cardinals. Juan Marichal is my all-time favorite pitcher (I used to be able to recite his year-by-year record, starting with his 21-8 for Michigan City, Ind., in 1958, but I can no longer do so). When I heard Willie McCovey line out to Bobby Richardson in Game 7 of the '62 Series, I was crushed. But those days are gone. How could anyone root for a team with You Know Who on it? I still have a Giants wastebasket in my home office, but who thinks about replacing wastebaskets?

I rooted for Boston College. I only missed four basketball games (out of 51), home or away, during my junior and senior years. Somehow, somehow, I usually figured out a way to get there. I exulted in the wins and took some of the losses quite hard.

I rooted for the 1967 Red Sox. That remains the greatest day-to-day fan experience of my life. I saw a city that had become extremely complacent about the team and the sport come alive thanks to the unexpected rise of a team that had finished ninth the year before and that had not truly contended since 1950, and I was thrilled to participate in the experience. If you're under 50, you must accept it on good faith when I tell you that as you drove around, or went from neighborhood to neighborhood on foot in those days when not all the games were televised, you could keep track of a game's progress by the sound of Ken Coleman and Ned Martin's voices, because everyone was tuned to WHDH (850). That's just what you did. Oct. 1, 1967, was one of the great highlights of a lifetime spent following sports. For me, it will always rank right up there with anything that happened in October 2004.

I still root. I can't help it. It's just me.

I know that many writers wear their professional indifference as a badge of honor, but I don't understand how anyone covering a team wouldn't prefer to see it win, if only because winning people are more likely to be happy people or, at least, accessible people. Winning is in a writer's best interest. There are exceptions, sure. The 2001 Red Sox were a miserable lot. They couldn't lose often enough or fast enough to suit me as that season wore on.

I don't understand not rooting. Any time I go to a neutral college basketball game, for example, it doesn't take long for me to line up with one side or the other,

usually because there is a player who intrigues me. It enhances my experience to manufacture a little care about the outcome.

To me, being a fan is understanding the ultimate reality that there are winners and losers and you can't overreact when the team you happen to be backing loses. But even before you go there, being a fan means you actually like the game they're playing and appreciate it for its own sake. Sometimes it's not strictly about wanting your team to win.

Exhibit A would be the night in 2001 when David Cone hooked up with Mike Mussina. For eight innings, the story was this absolutely exhilarating duel between a fine pitcher in the prime of life pitching a superb game (Mussina) and a cagey veteran conjuring up one last flashback effort (Cone). But with the Yankees leading, 1-0, and Mussina having retired the first 26 men he had faced, it became a matter of seeing some history. No true baseball fan wanted to see Carl Everett (ugh) get a hit. A Red Sox victory would have meant nothing in the big scheme of things as opposed to seeing a perfect game. To me, it must start with, and always be about, the baseball, not the blind loyalty to a team. That, I guess, is where I part company with many contemporary Red Sox followers. If that Mussina-Cone matchup had been the seventh game of a playoff series, no, of course not. In that context, you've got to root for the win.

It's a different climate now than it was in 1967. People just inherently knew how to be fans. Red Sox folklore had to do with 1946 (Pesky) and 1948 (Galehouse), but it was pretty benign stuff. No one was taking any of it personally, and that's the big difference.

Blame it on talk radio. Blame it on websites and chat rooms and blogs. Blame it on Shaughnessy (he can take it). But somewhere along the way, far too many members of this so-called "Red Sox Nation" have perverted the concept of fandom. As a result, there is no more narcissistic group of people rooting for any sports team in North America than that subsection of Red Sox followers who have made the shifting fortunes of the team all about them. When the ball went through Buckner's legs, it was, "How can he do that to me?"

And so it continues.

But don't listen to me. Listen to an e-mailer by the name of Lois Kane. She was introduced to baseball and the Red Sox by her grandfather, who listened to all the games on a portable radio and who, she says, taught her that the idea was "companionship and enjoyment of the journey through the game." She thinks he would be shocked by "the attitude that winning was the only important thing."

Concluded Lois, "In many ways it was more enjoyable to be a fan before it was fashionable to be one."

Thank you, Lois. That's what I'm talking about.

September 28, 2008

Updike hit it out of the park, too

It is well-known that author, poet, and critic John Updike identified Fenway Park as "a lyric little bandbox of a ballpark" in his celebrated 1960 New Yorker essay "Hub Fans Bid Kid Adieu," his first-person account of Ted Williams's final game. But the description goes deeper than that.

"Everything is painted green and seems in curiously sharp focus, like the inside of an old-fashioned peeping-type Easter egg," he tells us. "It was built in 1912 and rebuilt in 1934, and offers, as do most Boston artifacts, a compromise between Man's Euclidean determinations and Nature's beguiling irregularities."

"I think I might have stolen the idea of the 'lyric little bandbox of a ballpark' from someone else," laughs Updike.

Fine. But the Euclid and Nature references are pure Updike.

Forty-eight years ago today, John Updike, 28 years old and, though raised in Pennsylvania, a Ted Williams fan since childhood, decided it was a good idea to attend the afternoon game between the Red Sox and Baltimore Orioles. He, like all members of the public, knew only that it would be the final home game of Ted's career. Not until the game was concluded did people learn that it would be Ted's last

game, period, that he had announced before the game he would not be making a season-ending trip to Yankee Stadium.

The times were different. The word “hype” had barely entered the language. Today, there would be special editions, minted coins, and live shots galore.

“The world was a simpler place,” Updike notes.

But Wednesday, Sept. 28, 1960, was a dank, dreary day. And the Red Sox, Ted Williams aside, were a dank, dreary team on their way to a 65-89 record and a seventh-place finish. Accordingly, a mere 10,454 fans showed up. And it could very easily have been 10,453. John Updike’s first choice that day was to visit a lady on Beacon Hill. Fortunately, the lady was not home.

Updike explains in a 1977 epilogue:

“I took a taxi to Beacon Hill and knocked on a door and there was nothing, just a basket for mail temporarily hung on the door. A bright brown basket. So I went, as promised, to the game and my virtue was rewarded.”

Whatever reward Updike derived from attendance at that game does not begin to compare to the amount of pleasure his patronage has provided for others. For “Hub Fans Bid Kid Adieu,” published in the Oct. 22, 1960, *New Yorker*, is the most spellbinding essay ever written about baseball. Some, like critic Roger Dean, go even farther. “It is simply the greatest essay I have ever read,” he insists.

“It influenced me in a big way,” says Roger Angell, who would become the foremost baseball writer of the late 20th century, but in 1960 was merely a devoted follower of the sport who had yet to publish a word about it in the magazine. “And it has influenced just about every sportswriter who followed. The great thing is that he went expecting something amazing and incredible - and it happened. Only baseball provides in any number those totally unexpected turns.”

“My one effort as a sportswriter,” explains North Shore resident Updike. “It’s had a longer life than I would have expected.”

No one need be kept in suspense. We all know how the story ends. In the eighth inning, battling horribly adverse atmospheric conditions that have already cost him one shot at a homer, Ted Williams hits a 1-and-1 pitch from Jack Fisher onto the canopy covering a bench in the Red Sox bullpen. He runs the bases hurriedly amid relentless applause and does not tip his cap. He takes his place in left field at the start of the ninth and is replaced with Carroll Hardy by manager Pinky Higgins in the hopes he will acknowledge the crowd, and again he does not tip his cap. He has not tipped his cap since 1940 and he has no remote intention of deviating from his policy.

There are 10,454 eyewitnesses, and to our everlasting joy, one of them happens to be John Updike, who sets it all down on paper. I have read and reread what he has written about that dank, dreary afternoon and it is the visual equivalent of listening over and over again to a favorite song that never offends the ears.

“And it was all produced at lightning speed,” marvels David Remnick, the current editor of the magazine and, in an earlier incarnation, a Washington Post sportswriter himself. Magazine articles are often handed in six weeks or more in advance of publication. This astonishing work had a publication 25 days after the game.

“By New Yorker standards, it was an amazing turnaround,” Remnick points out. “It may not impress someone at the Associated Press - but it should.”

Updike, it seems, was writing from the heart. Ted Williams had been a youthful obsession, with Angell claiming that Updike had once revealed that the Thumper was half the reason he had settled in Boston. In the essay, he recalls listening with fascination to the 1946 All-Star Game in which Ted had gone 4 for 4 with two home runs, and of seeing Williams play in Philadelphia.

“I remember watching one of his home runs from the bleachers of Shibe Park; it went over the first baseman’s head and rose methodically along a straight line and it was still rising when it cleared the fence,” he writes. “The trajectory seemed qualitatively different from anything anyone else might have hit.”

“I was in love with him, you might say,” Updike declares. “Although it was a chaste relationship. No other sports figure has moved me as much as Ted Williams.”

Williams is his man, and for that he makes no apology.

“Williams,” he writes, “is the classic ballplayer of the game on a hot August weekday, before a small crowd, when the only thing at stake is the tissue-thin difference between a thing done well and a thing done ill ... No other player visible to my generation concentrated within himself so much of the sport’s poignance, so assiduously refined his natural skills, so constantly brought to the plate that intensity of competence that crowds the throat with joy.”

Ted Williams liked the piece. At least, that’s what was conveyed to Updike by a third party. And Ted even suggested Updike be a collaborator on a biography, an offer Updike politely declined.

“I’d said all I had to say on the subject,” he explains in the epilogue.

Here is Updike on the always controversial topic of whether or not Ted Williams was a team player: “For Williams to have distributed all of his hits so they did nobody else any good would constitute a feat of placement unparalleled in the annals of selfishness.”

(By the way, that must have been some woman, if she was in legitimate competition with Ted for Updike’s attention.)

But this is no hot August day. This is late September, early autumn in Boston. It is cold and damp. John Updike is there, and he is taking it all in.

“No one describes things like John Updike,” Remnick notes. “I call him the ‘Great Noticer.’”

Updike takes a seat on the third base side and looks around. “The crowd looked less like a weekday ballpark crowd than the folks you might find in Yellowstone National Park, or emerging from automobiles at the top of scenic Mount Mansfield.”

And this: "Along with these tots and second-honeymooners, there were Harvard freshmen, giving off that peculiar nervous glow created when a sufficient quantity of insouciance is saturated with enough insecurity." Thus speaks John Updike, Harvard '54.

Those aren't the only college students he happens to see and hear. "Behind me, two young male voices blossomed, cracking a joke about God's five proofs that Thomas Aquinas exists - typical Boston College levity."

The pregame ceremony honoring Williams allows Updike to smile at the sight of "a tight little flock of human sparrows who, from the lambent and pampered pink of their faces, could only have been Boston politicians."

As for the ballplayers, the Red Sox, he decides, are "a jangling medley of incompetent youth and aging competence," while the Orioles are "a much nimbler blend of May and December."

Updike reviews Ted's career, dividing it into three stages, which, he says, "may be termed Youth, Maturity, and Age; or Thesis, Antithesis, and Synthesis; or Jason, Achilles, and Nestor." Explaining Ted's tortured relationship with the fans, Updike explains that Ted has "quixotically desired to sever the game from the ground of paid spectatorship and publicity that surrounds it. Hence his refusal to tip his cap or to turn the other cheek to newsmen."

A Ted at-bat, according to John Updike: "Whenever Williams appeared at the plate - pounding the dirt from his cleats, gouging a pit in the batter's box with his left foot, wringing resin out of the bat handle with a vehement grip, switching the stick at the pitcher with an electric ferocity - it was like having a familiar Leonardo appear in a shuffle of Saturday Evening Post covers."

We get to the eighth, when, Updike reminds us, "We knew that a home run cannot be produced at will; the right pitch must be perfectly met and luck must ride with the ball." But Ted has sent right fielder Al Pilarcik to the 380 sign in the fifth, and thus "there will always lurk, around the corner in a pocket of our knowledge of the odds, an indefensible hope, and this was one of the times, which you now and

then find in sports, when a destiny of expectation hangs in the air and plucks an event out of the future.”

Of Ted’s stubborn refusal to tip his cap, despite being given three separate occasions to do so (coming to the plate, rounding the bases, and trotting in after being removed from the field), Updike sagely notes, “Gods do not answer letters.”

But they sometimes leave behind epic accounts of epic events.

Thank you, sir.

February 20, 2009

A good move? Stay put

FORT MYERS, Fla. - The Red Sox are engaged in negotiations with local authorities about the relocation of their spring training site. They’ve got the number of potential sites whittled from 15 to nine.

The problem: This is a want, not a need.

Their desire to “upgrade” is the wrong quest at the wrong time.

Who doesn’t know these are the most perilous economic times since the Great Depression? And anyone who’s paying attention understands that few areas are having more difficult economic times than southwest Florida.

John Henry, Tom Werner, and Larry Lucchino aren’t stupid. They should get it. Any action that asks either Fort Myers or Lee County to spend a dime on their behalf is shameful.

There is no good reason for the Red Sox to be seeking a new venue. City of Palms Park was built for them in 1992, amid great controversy. It was plopped into the middle of a residential neighborhood, and it could not have been built without forcible evictions. Think West End.

Meanwhile, there is nothing wrong with it. Oh, sure, it needs annual upkeep. Who doesn't? But the fact is this is a perfectly adequate facility, with great seating and sight lines, a very impressive locker room, a proper weight facility, an adequate supply of batting cages, etc. No one can say this isn't a decent facility.

So what's the problem? As far as I can tell, the Red Sox would be happier if their minor league fields, their auxiliary fields, which are about 2 1/2 miles up the street, were attached to the main ballpark, the way they are for the Twins and the Rays, among others. Boo-hoo.

It's a nonissue. The Red Sox are operating from their minor league facility right now. There are enough fields for everyone to get their work in. The major league club will relocate to City of Palms Park when games begin. From that point on, a Red Sox official will have to make that arduous trek 2 1/2 miles up the street if he needs to go to the minor league facility.

The horror!

Things are bad in southwest Florida. According to the New Yorker, "The highest [foreclosure] rate in the country could be found in Fort Myers and Cape Coral, where 12 percent of the area's residences were in foreclosure." A drive down US 41 from Fort Myers to Naples is a shocking and sobering experience. You cannot imagine how many abandoned and shuttered shopping malls there are, and not just along US 41. And that's just the beginning of the shocking story.

So how can the Red Sox even think about hitting up the local taxpayers for a facility estimated to cost between \$50 million and \$75 million, especially when, no matter what they say, they simply do not need it? They simply want what others have.

Boo-hoo.

Not everyone here is pleased. On Monday, The News-Press of Fort Myers, a very good paper, devoted its entire letters to the editors section to people who needed to vent about the proposed deal.

For me, the most eloquent person was Albert Sengeto of Fort Myers. A sample of his presentation:

“The state and county are both suffering a budget shortfall. They want our underpaid teachers to take a salary cut or face layoffs. We are highlighted in the national news as an example of the recession with 10 percent unemployment ... Newly built strip malls sit empty ... home foreclosures are overwhelming the county. All branches of county employees face layoffs. Businesses are closing everywhere. With all this going on, the biggest problem for our elected officials appears to be where to build a ballpark for the Red Sox.”

The Red Sox are relying on the old argument that their presence is a boon to the local economy, and that’s true. Now they can say a new stadium will provide construction jobs, and that’s true. But once the construction is done, the only jobs left are one-month jobs.

As a blogger named Kato Man observed, “Maybe all the teachers that will be out of work from lack of funding can get jobs at the new stadium, selling hot dogs.”

Or, as letter writer Jill S. Pett pointed out, “After construction of the Red Sox stadium is completed, the jobs that remain will be largely part-time peanut vendors - nice for some extra cash, but hardly family supporting employment.”

The Red Sox will argue that the Lee County authorities have made them a priority, and they’re simply going along. The Red Sox did spurn the strong goo-goo eyes focused on them by the city of Sarasota, the reason being the apparent desperation of Lee County to keep them anchored here. It’s not just money. Lee County very much likes basking in the reflective glory of the two-time world champion Red Sox.

But the Red Sox should restrain themselves. Staying here is enough of a commitment to Fort Myers. They don’t have to stick their hand out for \$50 million or \$75 million at a time when the area is under economic siege.

How bad are things here? The local Little Leagues are reporting a severe drop in enrollment because so many families cannot afford the registration fees. So instead of allowing the Lee County authorities to prostrate themselves at their feet, the Red

Sox, who have benefited so greatly over the past 16 years from the generosity of the Fort Myers community, should step up and subsidize those registration fees for the families having such a hard time.

The Red Sox will continue to be a boon to the local economy, playing out of City of Palms Park. And they don't need a handout from anyone, let alone the besieged people of Lee County.

July 19, 2011

Perfectly happy to manage incredible 16-inning game

I hung in till the end. There was no excuse to do otherwise.

Didn't have to get up too early for work. Wasn't really tired, anyway.

So why wouldn't I hang in till a little before 2 a.m. yesterday to see how that weird and wonderful Red Sox-Rays game came out? That's what a real sports fan does.

It really aggravates me when people denigrate the regular season of any sport. The cynics among us maintain that all that matters is the postseason, meaning that we have all wasted our time paying any attention to the games that determine who gets into the postseason and how the teams are to be slotted. These people probably would prefer to have teams ranked on paper at the beginning of a season and then plopped into an immediate playoff format.

Yet there is so much to be savored, and even so much to be learned, during the isolated goings-on of any regular-season competition. During the playoffs the context is paramount. We all understand the stakes. But during the regular season it is less clear, especially in a sport such as baseball, in which there are 162 games.

Baseball is the ultimate long-view sport. The best regular-season team in history, the 1906 Cubs, lost 23 percent of its games. Even a team that has won the milestone total of 100 has lost 62 games. The idea that you need one of those can't-get-too-

high-can't-too-low temperaments in order to survive in baseball is the gospel truth. You can't either gloat or freak out over the outcome of one game.

Every once in a while, however, something special materializes out of nowhere. When one of these games occurs, context becomes irrelevant. It reverts back to basics: Sport for sport's sake. As that game stretched from Sunday night into Monday morning, neither the Red Sox nor the Rays were thinking about standings ramifications or any big picture. They were all wrapped up in trying to win that game, because they instinctively knew this was a game they would be referencing the rest of their lives and they wanted to do so from the vantage point of a proud victor, not a noble loser.

Now in the interest of full disclosure I must confess that the only way to get through a five hour, forty-four minute game while watching on television is to multitask. I love baseball more than most people, but I need something to help me get through a televised game. Quite often it is ``Baseball Prospectus.'' It's fun and enlightening to see what those gentlemen have to say about the participants.

And I did go right to my ever-ready ``Baseball Prospectus'' to check out Tampa Bay reliever Jake McGee. But that was in the midst of other reading. For during the course of this marathon affair I also perused (perusing is perusing, it doesn't mean I read every word) the entire Sunday Globe; the entire Sunday Times; an issue of Vanity Fair containing an absolute must-read piece by Christopher Hitchens on the rather bizarre relationship between the USA and Pakistan; two issues of The Atlantic, one of which had a very interesting what-if slant on Sarah Palin, who willingly consorted with Democrats as governor of Alaska; and, finally, the SLAM magazine with Allen Iverson on the cover.

All without missing anything going on down there at The Trop. Thank God for replay? Well, of course!

The truth is I did see it all. I saw the Josh Beckett-Jeff Niemann duel that highlighted innings 1-8. I saw Dustin Pedroia go behind second base to make that sensational play on Reid Brignac. I saw the highlight-film Josh Reddick catch on Justin Ruggiano. I saw the B.J. Upton grab on Pedroia. I saw Sean Rodriguez shatter

the light bulb. I saw the Red Sox strand those eight guys in one three-inning stretch, including a failure to score on a bases-loaded, no-out circumstance.

I saw Tampa Bay's Joe Maddon and bench coach Dave Martinez given the old heave-ho by plate umpire Chad Fairchild for complaining about a Jacoby Ellsbury checked swing. (Check that, we were all informed about the ejections after the fact). I saw a frustrated Marco Scutaro slam down his bat in disgust and almost have it hit Rays catcher Kelly Shoppach.

I heard ESPN commentators Orel Hershiser and Bobby Valentine almost have the mutual Big One on the air when Adrian Gonzalez, of all people, flied out on a first-pitch Kyle Farnsworth offering after Pedroia had doubled to lead off the ninth. I saw Alfredo Aceves, having just retired seven men with contemptuous ease, hit Evan Longoria (0 and 2) and Casey Kotchman on successive pitches before getting out of the self-created jam in the 15th. I saw the Red Sox bench with the rally caps and Big Papi trying to put the hex on Brandon Gomes and Adam Russell in the 15th and 16th.

The rally caps are always a final clue that the players have recognized the game as being officially different than all other games. When you see the rally caps, you know this is no longer just another regular-season game.

I saw Josh Reddick draw a walk to lead off the 16th; Jason Varitek, in the midst of catching 16 innings at age 39, get down a professional sacrifice bunt; and Scutaro reach base on a chopper over the mound. And then, with two away, I saw Pedroia rip a hard one-hopper that landed in front of right fielder Ben Zobrist, scoring Reddick with the game's only run, at which point Valentine said, ``A lot of these guys might be tired, but that little guy could go all night long. He'll be back at the ballpark tomorrow at 11:30, ready to do it again.''

I saw Jonathan Papelbon, held back by manager Terry Francona even as Maddon was rolling through eight pitchers after his starter departed, get through a 1-2-3 inning for the save, the last out a smash by Brignac artfully plucked by Gonzalez, who then flipped to a covering Papelbon to end a game all are going to remember, not just for the rest of this year, but for decades.

Yup, I hung in there. Pretty good decision, even if I do say so myself.

Patriots

May 18, 2008

With Belichick, the cover-up is most revealing

Here is what Bill Belichick has done: He has placed Patriots fans on the defensive for the rest of their lives.

He has been exposed as being monumentally disingenuous at best and utterly duplicitous at worst. There can no longer be any doubt that he engaged in a practice he knew was against the rules.

The big question we cannot answer is how important it all was, really. Did his illegal practice of taping opponents' defensive signals aid his team's chances of victory in certain games by 20 percent? Ten percent? Three percent? One-10th of 1 percent? Not at all? No one will ever know.

Right now, it doesn't matter.

It doesn't matter, because the only thing that does matter now is the image of the New England Patriots. The sports community now associates the Patriots with cheating. The three Super Bowl championships are, and forever will be, under suspicion. The thought will never go away.

Let Mike Martz, coach of the vanquished Rams in the 2002 Super Bowl, absolve the Patriots all he wants. A year from now, five years from now, 50 years from now, who will know or remember what Mike Martz said? The Patriots have been irrevocably stained. They will be, in the eyes of many, the reverse Black Sox. They will be the team that broke the rules. Their three Super Bowls will be regarded as ill-gotten gain.

And Bill Belichick still hasn't fessed up.

Bob Kraft should be livid.

How could anyone not feel sorry for Bob Kraft? He hired a man he believed to be a superior coach, and his judgment appeared to be vindicated with three Super Bowls in four years. Kraft had presided over a phenomenal transformation, assuming control of the team when it was a distant fourth in the affections of local professional sports fans and seeing it grow to a point where his team was a strong 1-A to the mighty Boston Red Sox.

He had inherited Bill Parcells, and he made a mistake by hiring Pete Carroll, but he hit the lottery by hiring the dour defensive genius, ignoring those who said there was no reason Belichick would be any more successful as a head coach in Foxborough than he'd been in Cleveland, where he had alienated players, media, and the entire constituency.

His was said to be a model organization, where the owner owned, the personnel people found the right players, and the dour defensive genius coached 'em right up to championships, or close to 'em.

And now?

And now he has to live with the reality that he presides over the most despised and reviled franchise in all of contemporary American sport, and all because the coach he trusted has betrayed him.

Remember that glorious evening in New Orleans when the Patriots captivated the nation by taking the field en masse rather than individually? Remember those clutch drives orchestrated by Tom Brady, those game-winning kicks by Adam Vinatieri, and all the other snapshot moments in the three Super Bowls?

Tainted, all of it.

Not here, of course. We in New England will make an attempt to separate fact from fiction and real life from fantasy. With so much at stake, we will think it all out, knowing intellectually that what Belichick did, in all likelihood, did not materially affect the biggest games. We know there was no taping of that infamous Rams 2002 walkthrough. We know that the issue in Super Bowl XXXVI was the way Martz went away from Marshall Faulk; that the issue in Super Bowl XXXVIII

was, well, nothing, really; and the issue in Super Bowl XXXIX was Andy Reid's horrendous clock management.

We know all this. The problem now is that the rest of the world no longer cares. The rest of the world only knows that Bill Belichick thought he was above the law.

What we have here is a football version of Watergate.

Bill Belichick is Richard Nixon. Brilliant. Tormented. Paranoid. Controlling. Highly suspicious of the media.

Watergate was overkill. There was no need for it. Like, was Richard Nixon ever really in danger of losing the 1972 election to George McGovern? Spygate was likewise unnecessary. Belichick was, and is, a great football coach. Why did he not trust his own genius to win games honestly, especially after winning his first Super Bowl? Was he that obsessed with victory? Weren't all those hours staring at tapes enough? Did he think he had a divine right to victory? Clearly, something was churning inside that head.

He has turned out to be far more complex than we ever dreamed, hasn't he? Whoever would have believed Bill Belichick would have had such a tangled personal life? Who really knows this man?

Whatever his motivation, it wound up manifesting itself in colossal arrogance. For after being warned about continuing his illegal practice in a 2006 game at Green Bay, he did it again in, of all places, Giants Stadium the very first game in 2007. What kind of a statement was that? Was he saying "(naughty word) you" to Eric Mangini, a former ally who was now The Enemy?

Remember the ultimate moral of Watergate: The cover-up is worse than the crime.

Now we know that Bill Belichick covered up, and may still be covering up. Matt Walsh says he was told to prepare a cover story for his activities, even as Bill Belichick continues to insist that he had "misinterpreted" the rule in question. He alone of the 32 coaches was confused. Amazing. The commissioner didn't buy it, and neither should anyone else.

The cover-up is what matters now. Bill Belichick has yet to seek mercy from the National Court of Public Opinion. He has his story, and he's sticking to it. He's going to stonewall it, just as he stonewalls a routine injury inquiry. It's just his nature, apparently.

The sad truth is that he is the best coach. All reasonable people know that the 2007 season was 100 percent legitimate. No team in NFL history was ever under more scrutiny than the Patriots from Games 2 through 16 in the regular season, plus their entire postseason. Under this microscope, they won their first 18 games and came within 35 seconds of winning the last one, and it took two improbable plays on one down (an unprecedented Eli Manning escape and a phenomenal catch by David Tyree) to beat them.

The Patriots could easily win again next year. Bill Belichick could do it by choosing to play 10-on-11 all season long, just to show how competent he is, but it wouldn't matter. The damage has been done.

There is no way out. As long as Bill Belichick is the coach of the New England Patriots, America will despise this team. But a resignation or a dismissal would only lend legitimacy to the entire concept of wrongdoing.

This is not what Bob Kraft had in mind.

Bruins

June 17, 2011

Upon reflection, nearly perfect

Could anyone have concocted a more perfect fan scenario?

En route to winning the Stanley Cup for the first time since Lou Grant was telling Mary Richards he hated her spunk, fans of the Boston Bruins watched their team . . . break the hearts of their two most hated rivals — the Canadiens and Flyers — in completely different ways, the first by coming from an 0-2 deficit after losing the first two games at home, the second by dismissing the opponents in four a scant 12 months after they handed your team the most humiliating defeat in league history. . . outfight a gallant Tampa Bay team and its 40-something goaltender in a fasten-your-seat-belt series that culminated in one of the great hockey games any of us have ever been privileged to witness. . . spot the team with the league's best record two games and then win four of the next five by squeezing the life and very will out of them, finishing the job by shutting them out in their own rink.

All Stanley Cup wins are satisfying, but few have ever been won while traveling such a treacherous path. It was almost — almost — worth waiting 39 years to enjoy it.

So much for all the ``alwayses'' and ``nevers.'' Did we all not tire of hearing how great the odds are against winning a series if you lose the first two games? Difficult is one thing. Impossible is quite another.

Yes, it's harder if you don't at least get a split of the first two. But it has been done; that's all anyone needed to know. We in Boston should know better than anyone, having lived through both sides of an 0-3 comeback in a six-year span.

All these "alwayses" and "nevers" are true until they're not true. End of story.

Now we have a new one. No NHL team had ever won three Game 7s in one postseason. Well, now one has. Oh, and no team had ever shut out a team on the road in a Game 7. True Wednesday morning, absolutely. Not true Thursday.

History, we so love our history here. Try this one. Consider the parallel between the NESN twins, the Red Sox and Bruins. Was there a lower feeling than the Aaron Boone home run, complete with the Pedro controversy? And what happened a year later? Euphoria! It was complete and utter revenge, accomplished in the most humiliating manner, correct?

OK, was there a lower feeling for Bruins fans than seeing the team blow both a 3-0 series lead and a 3-0 home-ice lead in Game 7 to the despicable team from Philadelphia? No way. A year later . . . a sweep? Oh, there is a hockey god after all.

The 2004 Sox and 2011 Bruins win championships one year after suffering two of the toughest losses ever. We're barely worthy.

What a tremendous ride this was, 25 games spanning 63 days. So much happened, it's impossible to digest it all. Does anyone remember Zdeno Chara getting sick and missing a game? Didn't think so. Wait a minute . . . didn't Patrice Bergeron suffer another concussion? Yes, yes, yes! Coming back to me now. And The Kid came in and got two goals, one of which reminded everyone why he was a No. 2 overall pick to begin with. Remember that?

Didn't they spend a couple of days in Lake Placid? Whose idea was that? Worked out pretty well, though, didn't it?

Mark Recchi went scoreless for 11 games and, c'mon, you know you said it; you, me, and half of New England moaned that he was too old and couldn't skate anymore, and how can Claude Julien keep him on the power play? And who was one of the best players on the ice in the Final? Hint: We won't be seeing him anymore.

Claude, how about Claude? It was a universal assumption, rightly or wrongly, that he was going to get sacked if they lost to Montreal. Remember that?

You have to feel good for Claude Julien, a truly decent man who has his hockey principles and who now has the satisfaction of seeing his vision of how the game should be played result in the ultimate prize.

Winning the Cup is so hard, you know? Well, I guess we do know, since this team hadn't done it in 39 years. There were a lot of good players who couldn't get it done here — e.g. O'Reilly, Ratelle, Middleton, Park, Pederson, Milbury, Oates, Janney, and, of course, the hallowed Bourque.

And one of the very best of anyone's very best said what he has just seen makes him appreciate what it takes to get your hands on that precious Cup more now than when he was wearing a Bruins sweater.

"I'm drained," said Cam Neely, once upon a time a stellar player and now a man with a key to the executive washroom. "I don't recall it being that way when I played. Now I realize what it takes to do this.

"It's so draining, physically for the players and mentally for us in suits. I'm mentally fried."

Think of how much more respect and admiration we have for some of these players now than we may have had two months ago.

Start with Brad Marchand. Hard to imagine anyone had him down for 11 playoff goals. He was a scrappy pup who matured into an alpha dog before our very eyes.

I mean, yeah, there were the hits and the Pie-like taunting of the Sedins and the other things that will make him a villain throughout the league. But did you check out that fancy-schmancy stickhandling as he went over and under and around and through Kevin Bieksa, a pretty good player, for his wraparound goal Wednesday night? That's a hockey player, right there.

We could go on and on, but how about this one? Gregory Campbell. Make no mistake, Gregory Campbell's so-called "fourth line" turned around Game 7.

The Bruins were being outhit and generally outplayed in the first period when Campbell & Co. came on to play a dominating shift that monopolized the puck in the

Vancouver end for about a day and a half and infused energy into the entire team. It was hardly a surprise when Marchand and Bergeron connected a short time later for the first goal.

Too bad they couldn't have given Campbell, sitting on the bench, an assist. We'll have to speak to Mr. Bettman.

That was no isolated incident. Campbell did things like that for the two months it took to win this Cup. He was the consummate "role player." As such, he symbolized what was so endearing about this team.

They really were a true T-E-A-M, seeking, and getting, vital contributions from the likes of Campbell, Shawn Thornton, Daniel Paille, Rich Peverley, and Chris Kelly, to augment the more publicized achievements of Chara, Dennis Seidenberg, Andrew Ference, Milan Lucic, Recchi, Michael Ryder, Nathan Horton, David Krejci, Bergeron, and Marchand.

As for Mr. Conn Smythe himself, perhaps the ultimate compliment came from one Mr. Glenn "Doc" Rivers, who was among the attendees at Game 6.

"Tim Thomas," said the Celtics coach, "is like having Bill Russell sit in front of the hoop without an illegal defense."

Sadly, far too much of what Bill Russell did to earn his reputation predated the videotape era. But every last second of what Tim Thomas has just done will be there for us all to savor. The Sedin twins will forever be stonewalled, and Steve Downie probably thinks he's still going to score.

Ha!

College Basketball

April 2, 1985

The Supernova Villanova is a shooting star, 66-64

LEXINGTON, Ky. - I have said it before and I will say it again: I have absolutely no conception what people who aren't sports fans do for true excitement.

The answers I have received are laughable. Concerts, I'm told. Concerts do not have an outcome. Politics, I am told. Sorry, but sitting around waiting for the election returns from the 11th Precinct does not pose a challenge to my heartbeat.

I am here to tell you sorry, wretched souls who drift aimlessly through life unable to appreciate the joys of sports competition that I am very glad I am not you.

I am lucky. The Boston Globe flew me down here, all expenses paid, so I could sit 12 feet from a fascinating human drama. Here I am, someone who has followed college basketball since 1952, and I got to see what may have been the greatest championship game ever played.

Villanova 66, Georgetown 64 was simply a phenomenal sporting event on every level. This game threw off sparks from the moment a delightful young man named Harold Pressley drove baseline and squeezed up a two-hand reverse layup past the great Patrick Ewing to open up the scoring. That came on Villanova's second possession and set the tone for the most amazing offensive show ever seen in this great tournament.

Even you non-sporties can appreciate the fact that the object of this game is to throw the ball through the orange ring and that Villanova did so 22 times in 28 attempts under the most intense pressure imaginable. Villanova's offense consisted largely of scoring or losing the ball without a shot. The new national champions shot 78.6 percent against a team that had limited its previous 37 opponents to 40-percent shooting.

History tells us that a team simply does not shoot 55, 60 or 65 percent in a championship game because the pressure is just too great for kids to handle. Your average NCAA title game is a tense, mistake-filled mess. Furthermore, you never, at any time, shoot 50 percent against Georgetown. You don't, but Villanova did - and this morning the Augustinians have bragging rights over the Jesuits as a result.

But merely reciting the Villanova shooting percentage, as astonishing as it was, does not convey a feeling of the splendor of this exercise. The very best moments in sports occur when logic and form charts are replaced by illogic and Ouija boards. Do not forget for one instant that Georgetown was a prohibitive favorite in this game. Nobody, but nobody - outside the immediate Villanova family - honestly believed Villanova had a chance to win.

But Villanova believed. You can tell they believed because they came out and played. They didn't patty cake with the ball; they passed it until they got good shots, which they didn't hesitate to take. And on this golden evening, this fairy-tale, star-crossed evening, those shots went in, and it didn't make any difference whether the shot turned up 10 seconds into the possession or 10 minutes.

You will be reading a lot about how Villanova benefitted from the absence of a shot clock in this tournament, but in this game the Wildcats just played confident basketball. Villanova played a game that could easily have absorbed a 45-second clock, proving once again that at the high level of NCAA play kids should be encouraged to play the game naturally, not taught to view the game as a passing and free throw-shooting exhibition.

So there was Gary McLain firing up a pair of 21-footers in the second half and swishing them. There was Ed Pinckney, the tournament MVP, sticking his nose in low and taking the ball to Ewing. There was Dwayne McClain spinning by one defender, and arching a baseline runner over the frightening, elevated form of Mr. Ewing. And there was the redoubtable Harold Jensen taking - and making - five medium-range jumpers.

Whatever Villanova did worked. But it would not have worked if these kids and their coaches didn't truly believe they had the ability to make it work.

Villanova's achievement cannot be exaggerated because it beat a great team playing a very good ballgame. No one will soon forget the poise of a Michael Jackson as he stuck one in from the top of the key with his team down five with 5 minutes to play, or the panache of a David Wingate putting Georgetown ahead with a superb banker two possessions later. Georgetown itself shot 55 percent and had a quite respectable total of 11 turnovers. Georgetown's defense forced Villanova into 17 turnovers. Georgetown would have beaten every team in the country last night. Except one.

This is a Villanova team that lost 10 games. There were very low points to their season, such as a devastating loss to Boston College and a shocking 23-point loss to Pitt. But Villanova was a team ideally suited for tournament play, and once Villanova arrived in the final it reached out and confronted greatness on its own terms.

Villanova did what Americans have always prided themselves on doing. They recognized their Moment and seized it. "I wanted us to play not with the idea not to lose," said coach Rollie Massimino, "but to play to win."

So if you think it was just a basketball game, I ask you: What have you done lately that could properly be classified as "exhilarating"? Probably nothing. But 23,000 of us in Rupp Arena saw a truly exhilarated group of young men last night. I'd like to be one of those young men this morning.

February 1, 2000

Holding the Fort

FORT KENT, Maine - Route 1 starts here.

From Fort Kent, Houlton is Hilton Head, Bangor is Miami Beach, Portland is Barbados, and Boston is Buenos Aires. Fort Kent is in the far north of legendary Aroostook, America's largest county east of the Mississippi. And why, incidentally, have so many millions been led to believe that Route 1 starts in Presque Isle? No, no, no. Leave the pier at Key West, point the car north, pass through all those speed traps, Auto Miles, shopping malls, and Main Streets and when, about 2,000 winding

miles of asphalt later, you get to Presque Isle, you've still got 58 miles of serious driving before you arrive in Fort Kent.

In Fort Kent, Maine (a Rand McNally-listed population of 2,123), there is, in fact, a recently-installed stoplight, even if some folks hereabouts quip that the only reason for its presence is so that Quigley's Hardware can mention it in radio spots. There is a McDonald's. But there is no Starbucks, no Gap, no Victoria's Secret, and this is one of the few places left in America where it's tough to find a USA Today. Even the nearest Wal-Mart is back in Presque Isle. There is one movie theater, the Plourde Century, but don't expect to be seeing "Topsy-Turvy" any time soon. (This week, you'd better like "The Green Mile.") Hey, but first things first. There are two nail and tanning salons.

There is also a college, and in the realm of looking like a backdrop for a Sonja Henie Film Festival, and with a longitude of 68.56 north and a latitude of 47.23 west, there is no more isolated college, and, therefore, college athletic program in the lower 48 states than the University of Maine-Fort Kent, and never mind Western Washington University out there in Bellingham, which has longitude-latitude readings of 122.43 and 48.73, respectively, but which is in a town of 64,000 large enough to have a whole lot more than one stoplight, not to mention its own daily newspaper. North? Yup. Remote? Uh-uh.

Athletically speaking, Fort Kent is the home office of remote. So it is entirely fitting that in the midst of the ice and the snow and the subzero temperatures, there is a nice little basketball team, a ranked one, if you don't mind, a team whose Y2K fantasy is a postseason bid to the NAIA Division 2 tournament (coming this year to the unspeakable tackiness of Branson, Mo.), a team that has brought together so many elements of our increasingly compact global society that, as one local puts it, "John Rocker wouldn't like this team."

No, he wouldn't, not with the Bosnian Croat and the Bosnian proper and the Lithuanian and the Canadian and the black kid from London and the kid from Long Island and the dramatically culture-shocked kid from Florida and the two kids who actually come from Maine and, finally, the 5-foot-6-inch shooting guard who cheerfully 'fesses up to having no point guard skills whatsoever and who, it says

here, lays open-and-shut claim to being the greatest Laotian-born basketball player ever to draw a breath in the history of this entire planet.

Is that a diverse enough bunch for you? And have we mentioned the coach, himself a black Londoner who admits that he usually learns a lot more from these kids than they learn from him?

His name is Derek Johnson, and after prepping for this gig by spending his college career downstate at the University of Maine-Machias, he is now addicted to this lifestyle.

“It’s isolated, all right,” he says. “But the feeling you get here is such a good feeling that the isolation you feel is when you leave here to go back where you came from. When I go back to London, I can’t wait to get back here, because, to me, London now feels so crowded.”

Such touching testimony to the virtues of Fort Kent, both town and school, is a downright symphonic sound to the ears of Dr. Charles Lyons, the ebullient school president who is so energetic, gregarious, and unpretentious that he can only be thought of as the anti-Silber. Lyons is proud of what’s going on at his school, which was continuously threatened with closure by the state legislature during the early and mid ‘90s. A 27-year teaching and administrative veteran of the University of Maine system — he still teaches one Introduction to Special Education course — he was brought into a dying school four years ago and given a simple mandate: Increase the enrollment or we’ll shutter the doors.

“I was Dick Radatz being asked to come in here and throw heat for three innings,” he says. “And I had to want the ball every day.”

President Supercloser now points to some impressive numbers, the most important of which is an enrollment that has soared 44 percent in the past two years. With more than 1,000 students, 750 of which are full-time enrollees, UMFK is now, as the president puts it, “maxed out.” Why, UMFK is no longer the smallest school in the system, having passed Maine-Machias. The current priority is a building campaign to “grow the infrastructure to match the place we have here.”

Being a cozy place with no secrets, it’s not for everybody.

“It’s good if it’s what you need,” acknowledges Tim Farrar, a guard from West Paris, Maine. “But if someone whispers, it’s a shout across the campus.”

There may not be Big Brother, but there is always Dr. Charlie, who gives new meaning to the term “hands-on boss.”

“We don’t take any junk in the dorms,” he explains. “The best way to kill enrollment is to have a lot of rowdiness in the dorms. If we get it, someone’s gonna be smelling momma’s cooking tonight.”

Cut a class if you like, but expect to be confronted, with the president himself. Charlie Lyons knows all.

“I get around,” he smiles. “Here I can make the ‘visites de paroiss,’ the visits of the parish priest. You can’t do that everywhere.”

Oh, yes, the lapse into French. Across the river lies Clair, New Brunswick, where the Maple Leaf Restaurant and Motel seductively blinks garish lights to lure the kids across the border for the under-21 drinking opportunities. Quebec is not far away. Spend any time in Fort Kent and you will hear both French and Franglais. In the local eating spots. At the hardware store. At the gas station. Everywhere.

“My grandmother lays French on me all the time,” says Julie Marquis, a Fort Kent native who plays for the women’s basketball team. “But I think it’s finally dying out in the younger generation.”

Dommage. (Too bad.)

Language issues aside, town and gown are seamless. The school sells what the town sells, and that means family, safety, security, and trust.

“We’ve got the Paradis Supermarket,” points out Lyons. “Every night there will be 200 cars in the parking lot. They’ll all be running. No one worries. No one will think anything of it.”

Cars running in the parking lot is a suitable metaphor for the college itself. No one comes to UMFK to face these harsh winters alone.

“The professors care,” confirms Shaun Tomblin, a rugged, 6-foot-3-inch senior from Rego Park, N.Y., who has given the Bengals a solid inside presence and some serious locker room leadership. “If someone were to ask me what it’s like here, I’d say it’s like sending your kid off to summer camp. It’s isolated, yes, but that means there are few distractions. You can concentrate on the things that make you a better person.”

“The teachers care,” echoes Robert Miller, whose path from Palm Beach to Fort Kent includes various run-ins with the law and a sobering educational visit to a Florida state pen that told him, whoa, there might be another way to go. “They are committed to you. I’m glad I found this place.”

Robert Miller says he’s on track to graduate, and when he does, he is taking that piece of parchment and waving it in certain people’s faces back home.

“I have to prove to some critics, including people in my own family, that I’m not a waste,” he asserts. “I want to go home with that college degree and say, ‘I did it.’ “

It’s not as if Derek Johnson’s 17-3 team has come out of some basketball test tube. The Bengals were 23-4 last year, after all. By hiring Jim Graffam four years ago, Charlie Lyons was telling the world he was interested in a quality athletic program, the Graffam name being synonymous with both basketball and basketball excellence in Maine.

“Everybody in Maine knows Jim Graffam,” says Lyons, who is clearly grateful to have Graffam as a two-year coach and now as an athletic director.

Graffam deflects all such praise with a roll of his eyes. All he knows is that he certainly never thought he’d wind up here, at The End of the Earth. But now he’s got this nice house less than five minutes from the school and he’s got the DirecTV and all the necessary Internet access, so why not? If all goes well, the school will soon be joining the likes of Husson, St. Joseph’s, and Thomas in the Maine Athletic Conference and that will mean better competition and increased exposure. It might even make scheduling a little easier.

Most of all, it should facilitate recruiting.

You think recruiting is tough in Division 1? Try recruiting in Division 3, or, in this case, NAIA Division 2, with no scholarships. Then try selling a school where your neighbors might turn out to be Dasher, Prancer, and Rudolph.

So where did Graffam get players good enough to be 40-7 the past two years?

“Most of our foreign and black kids are here on diversity scholarships,” he points out. As school vice president of administration John Martin explains, “Each of the state schools has a special waiver for ‘diversity’ students. This state is so white. How else would we diversify?”

If you’re going to diversify yourself, why not start with Drazen Jozic and Dennis Traup, a pair of teammates on a Bosnian youth team who came over to the US in ‘91 for a basketball tour and who were quite literally abandoned in Chicago when the bombs began to fall back home? You read that right. They were stuck in Chicago with no family, no money, and not a word of English between them.

But this remains, in case you’ve forgotten, a great country. And these are truly amazing kids. They were given foster homes. They went to high school in Chicago. And here they are, playing for the University of Maine-Fort Kent Bengals. TV movie, anyone?

Take 5-9 Drazen Jozic away from this team, and it’s in deep doo-doo, for Drazen Jozic has been leading all of America’s NAIA Division 2 players in assists, which is only the half of what he brings to the table. That “L” stamped on his forehead stands for “leadership,” Jozic being the kind of kid who will not only dole out an assist or drill a clutch three, but will also bang on a teammate’s door the next morning to make sure he doesn’t miss class. It is, says Coach Johnson, typical of his veteran players, most of whom are uncommonly mature.

“There is tremendous peer pressure on this team,” says Johnson. “They all want to improve and they don’t want to let each other down.”

The bonding is multi-layered. First, each is an athletic reject of some kind, whether it’s Jozic at 5-9 or Shaun Tomblin at 6-3 or Barkleyesque Floridian Robert Miller as a 6-4 center (who just happens to have been leading the country in field goal percentage) or some of the others who had been told they were too short or too

slow or too something, right down to Phone Phetvixay, the aforementioned 5-6 Laotian-born and Lowell-bred bombardier who has had as many as seven 3-pointers in a game ("Shooting is my natural talent") but has no point guard proclivities. Welcome to NCAA Division 3 and NAIA Division 2 basketball.

Secondly, they are bonded by the Outward Bound nature of their chosen environment. (Suggested motto: The Team That Shivers Together Delivers Together.)

Finally, they are bonded by their astonishing personal differences. Who needs a stamped visa when all you have to do to gain some insight into a foreign culture is knock on someone's door?

How many college teams amuse themselves on road trips by teaching each other languages?

"One thing about this team," says Jozic, whose dream is to play professionally in Croatia, "there are so many cultures. When we have nothing else to do, we learn some more language. We're never bored. We talk about what it's like back in each of our homes. I really think that's one reason why we play together so well on the court."

"I guess I can speak a little of all their languages," says Phetvixay, a Lowell Catholic grad who emigrated from Laos when he was 7. "I was red-shirted last year, and I was down. I came close to leaving. But Drazen said to me, 'How could you go to another school and think you'll meet people like us?' So I stayed."

The opponent on this occasion is the archrival. When you're Fort Kent, your version of the Great Satan is — what else? — Presque Isle, the haughty team from the big city with the Wal-Mart.

And it is a serious rivalry. The soccer teams play for the coveted Potato Barrel, and Johnson can get passionate about that because he's also the assistant soccer coach.

"We hadn't beaten them in about 10 years," says Johnson. "We beat them the first time this year at their place and the place went nuts. When they came back for

the second game, someone had a sign, 'Home of the Potato Barrel,' and they were very angry."

At game time, UMFK is 14-3 and UMPI (or, as it's known in Maine athletic circles, "Umpee") is 4-9. UMFK had won the first game by 18 down in Presque Isle.

"Doesn't matter," warns Johnson. "This a big rivalry game. They'll be up for us. After all, the winner is King of the County." And a huge county it is, indeed.

UMFK's gym is located inside the 25-year-old Sports Center, and it is a perfectly commodious 1,000-seat home court that, on this crisp January night, will bring about 500 students and local followers in from the cold at prices ranging from \$3 for adults to 50 cents for elementary students to zero for ID-carrying UMFK students, faculty, and staff. They will get the blaring rock music, the dancing girls, the Bengal mascot, and the spotlight intros and they will also get a disappointingly so-so performance from their beloved basketball team, which grabs an early lead and then plays as if it thinks it couldn't possibly lose.

But it almost does. Things get hairy in the end, and when the buzzer sounds the Bengals have won by only a 68-65 score and Coach Johnson has some good coaching oratory ready for the next day since what he has seen is a team that appeared to believe its press clippings (even if there are precious few) and seems to have taken its heady and unprecedented No. 26 NAIA Division 2 ranking to heart.

A few of his players already know what to expect. "This is a game I personally like," says Tomblin. "It tells us where we really are as a team. We almost blew it. We'll learn something from this."

The game is over, and there being no sports information director — are you nuts? — athletic director Graffam phones the results and rundown to Presque Isle sportscaster Rene Cloukey, and when Graffam returns home for the customary postgame get-together with the staff, he can see the complete results of his efforts come to life on Channel 8. And so another day at The End of the Earth comes to a close.

The next morning the temperature on the First Citizens Bank clock is minus-22. Better them than you, is that what you're saying? Maybe so. But later that day a

school president will be asking a female student/athlete/mom how her baby is, and that evening 200 cars will be running outside a supermarket. And there's an awful lot to be said for that, isn't there?

March 7, 2007

Reflections on my visits to 161 college venues

Two ways to get there, they told me. You can take the long way, which is around the mountain, or you can take the short way, which is over the mountain.

"The short way sounds good to me," I said.

It was Jan. 20, 1986, and my destination was Johnson City, Tenn., home of East Tennessee State University. I was in Sparta, N.C., doing a story on Oak Hill Academy (Sparta being where one stayed when visiting Oak Hill, located 15 miles away in Mouth of Wilson, Va.), and I had a night off. East Tennessee was playing Davidson in a clash of Southern Conference division leaders. Clearly, that had Bob Ryan written all over it.

That's because I am a college basketball junkie. I have been going to games since 1952, and have now seen games in 161 venues, with No. 162 coming up tomorrow when the Atlantic Coast Conference tourney begins in the St. Pete Times Forum. The total includes college gyms and arenas of every description, plus NBA arenas that stage either NCAA Tournament games or, on occasion, regular-season games. It includes men's and women's games, plus the 1984 national junior college tournament in Hutchinson, Kan. The total does not include the five collegiate arenas (Wyoming, BYU, Toledo, Ohio State's St. John Arena, Evansville) in which I have seen NBA exhibition games.

Back to that fateful night 21 years ago. I get to the mountain, which locals on both sides of the North Carolina-Tennessee border know as "Sam's Gap," and everything is just fine until the snow starts. Within minutes, a violent squall is raging. I am on this two-lane road at the top of this mountain, and I cannot see a

thing. I start one of those foxhole prayer sessions, promising the Big Guy that if he gets me out of this I might even consider covering NASCAR.

I am also saying to myself, “Why didn’t I take the long way? I have done a lot of dumb things in my life, but this is clearly the dumbest.”

But just as quickly as the squall comes up, so, too, does it subside. The entire event lasts perhaps 15 minutes. I make my way down the mountain into Johnson City. I see a Holiday Inn. I run in, get a room, throw my stuff onto the bed and ask for directions to the school.

I park my car and simply follow the crowd to the Memorial Center, a Quonset hut-style arena. I ask for the best available ticket (\$5), buy myself a hot dog and a Coke, and, five minutes before tipoff, settle into my seat, which is in the first row behind the East Tennessee bench.

Now for the best part: East Tennessee licks Davidson, 80-76.

In triple overtime. How cool is that? What snow squall?

I have no doubt that many members of the United States Basketball Writers Association have been to far more than 161 sites to see college basketball. But I am rather proud of that total, considering that at no time during my 38 years at the Globe have I ever been a full-time college basketball writer. This quest is a labor of love. Minor league baseball and college basketball are my avocations, and I have been a lot more successful at getting myself to the latter spots than I have the former.

The very first? I honestly don’t know. I’ve been going to them for so long I can’t say for sure. But logic says it was one of three places: Princeton’s Dillon Gym, the Pennsylvania Palestra, or the Philadelphia Convention Hall. My father was always involved in sports, and I’ve never known any life other than going to games, mostly baseball and basketball. So when I say this began in 1952, it’s an educated guess. It could have been ‘51.

This year I’ve been able to add five to the list: the George Washington University Smith Center, Amherst’s LeFrak Gymnasium, the Verizon Center in

Washington, D.C., San Diego State's Cox Arena, and the Donald L. Tucker Center in Tallahassee, home of Florida State.

I am told that Sam's Gap now features a new four-lane road. But I bet it still has snow squalls.

A few random observations:

Most venues, one school

Surprisingly, Boston University. I have seen the Terriers take the floor in Sargent Gymnasium (where BU beat Boston College in Chuck Daly's head coaching debut), Case Center, Walter Brown Arena, and Agganis Arena.

Flat-out strangest place

Texas-Arlington. Texas Hall is a converted theater. The court was on a stage. A big stage. There were a few bleacher seats up there, but most of the spectators were watching from the theater seats. Bizarre, but memorable.

True belt-notch game No. 1

I saw Villanova beat Rio Grande and the legendary Bevo Francis by a 93-92 score at the long-gone Philadelphia Arena.

True belt-notch game No. 2

I saw La Salle and Tom Gola beat Furman and Frank Selvy at the Philly Convention Hall in 1954. As I recall, Selvy had his usual 40, while Gola had his usual 27, plus his usual quota of rebounds and assists. Gola remains a top-10 all-time college player, in case you're wondering.

Did you see Bill Bradley's first college game? I did

Lafayette put a box-and-one on him, but Bradley had 27 as Princeton won at the old Dillon Gymnasium in 1962.

Biggest disappointment

UCLA's Pauley Pavilion. There is no lobby. You go through the doors and immediately descend to the seats. The crowd isn't exactly what you would call lively, either.

Hoppiest floor

Stanford's Roscoe Maples Pavilion. The floor is built on springs. The whole floor area vibrates, including the press table.

Building most in need of a Richter scale

Oregon's McArthur Court. Ask anyone. When they get stomping and shouting, the entire place shakes.

Best-kept secret

Virginia Tech's Cassell Coliseum. Why no one ever talks about this place, I don't know. The 10,000 seats all feel as if they are breathing down the back of every player. This is an electrifying atmosphere.

Most pleasant surprise

Arkansas's Bud Walton Arena. Truly a beautiful structure, and it features the best use of a band — from before game time to 20 minutes after — that I've ever encountered in college basketball.

Most overrated joint

Syracuse's Carrier Dome. Just too big and not really, you know, a gym. But maybe it's just me.

It's OK, but...

Duke's Cameron Indoor Arena is wonderful, but the Cameron Crazies themselves are now like a human theme park, doing what they think the world expects them to do.

Most bittersweet memory

Being front and center at Cameron as Len Bias exploded for 40 against Duke in 1986.

One place they never should have gotten rid of

Maryland's Cole Field House. First of all, it should have been declared a national landmark, since it was the site of the Texas Western-Kentucky game. And it was a perfect 14,000-seat gym, for any game.

Really cool place you don't know about

Rice's Autry Court. Totally quaint, with a big blue curtain at one end. Trust me, it works.

The place no one will ever believe actually existed

Harvard's Indoor Athletic Building. You climbed to the fourth floor. And if you were really lucky, a phenomenal game with Oral Roberts might break out.

Biggest hole in my athletic soul

I am ashamed to admit I have not yet been to the famed Allen Field House. Yes, I've seen it in the summertime, but that doesn't count. I have now decided I must go there only when Kansas is playing someone it truly hates, like Missouri, or, now that Bob Huggins is there, K-State.

Place and time I'd most like to revisit

Palestra, circa 1966. Give me a classic Palestra doubleheader, the first game being one of the Philly squads against a highly rated outsider and the second game being a certified Big Five clash, and then send the chariots. I'd be ready to go.

ONE MAN, 35 STATES, 161 GYMS

MASSACHUSETTS (29): Boston College, Roberts Center; Boston College, Conte Forum; Boston University, Sargent Gymnasium; Boston University, Case Center; Boston University, Walter Brown Arena; Boston University, Agganis Arena; Northeastern, Cabot Gymnasium; Northeastern, Matthews Arena; Harvard, Indoor Athletic Building; Harvard, Lavietes Pavilion; Tufts; Cambridge YMCA (Suffolk); Brandeis; Boston Garden; FleetCenter; Worcester Auditorium; Worcester Centrum; Holy Cross, Hart Center; Framingham State; Curry; Stonehill; Merrimack; UMass-Amherst, Curry Hicks Cage; UMass-Amherst, Mullins Center; Springfield Civic Center; UMass-Boston; UMass-Lowell; Amherst; Mass. Maritime Academy.

CALIFORNIA (15): UCLA, Pauley Pavilion; USC; Los Angeles Sports Arena; Cow Palace; Loyola-Marymount; San Diego Arena; Oakland Arena; Long Beach Arena; Cal-Irvine; Stanford; University of San Francisco; Great Western Forum; California; San Jose Compaq Center; University of San Diego, Cox Arena.

PENNSYLVANIA (9): Pennsylvania Palestra; Philadelphia Convention Hall; Philadelphia Arena; Pittsburgh Civic Center; University of Pittsburgh Fitzgerald Arena; Villanova Field House; Spectrum; First Union Center; Drexel.

NEW YORK (8): Old Madison Square Garden; New Madison Square Garden; St. John's; Syracuse Carrier Dome; Fordham; Columbia; Long Island University, Schwartz Center; St. Francis (Brooklyn).

TEXAS (7): Texas, Erwin Center; Houston Baptist; Texas-Arlington; TCU; Dallas, American Airlines Center; Texas Southern; Rice.

NORTH CAROLINA (6): North Carolina, Smith Center; Duke; Winston-Salem, Clarence Gaines Gymnasium; Winston-Salem Auditorium; Greensboro Coliseum; Charlotte Coliseum.

FLORIDA (5): Tropicana Field; Miami Arena; Jacksonville; Florida, O'Connell Center; Florida State, Donald Tucker Center.

INDIANA (5): Indiana State; Butler, Hinkle Field House; Indianapolis, RCA Dome; Indianapolis, Market Square Arena; Notre Dame.

LOUISIANA (5): Louisiana State; Loyola of New Orleans; Louisiana Superdome; University of New Orleans; Tulane.

MISSOURI (5): St. Louis, Kiel Auditorium; St. Louis, Checkerdome; St. Louis, Savit Center; St. Louis, Edward Jones Dome; Missouri-Kansas City, Kansas City Auditorium.

NEW JERSEY (5): Princeton, Dillon Gymnasium; Princeton, Jadwin Gymnasium; Rider; Meadowlands/Brendan Byrne Arena/Continental Airlines Center; Rutgers Athletic Center.

OHIO (5): Dayton; Cleveland State, Woodling Gymnasium; Cleveland State, Wolstein Center; Ohio State, Value City Arena; Xavier.

RHODE ISLAND (5): Providence, Alumni Hall; Providence Civic Center/Dunkin' Donuts Arena; Rhode Island, Keaney Gymnasium; Rhode Island, Ryan Center; Brown, Marvel Gymnasium.

CONNECTICUT (4): Hartford Civic Center; New Haven Arena; UConn Field House; UConn, Gampel Pavilion.

ILLINOIS (4): Loyola of Chicago, Alumni Gymnasium; Loyola of Chicago, Gentile Center; Horizon/Allstate Center; Illinois-Chicago.

GEORGIA (3): Georgia Tech; Omni; Georgia Dome.

KENTUCKY (3): Kentucky, Memorial Coliseum; Kentucky, Rupp Arena; Louisville, Freedom Hall.

MAINE (3): Maine, Alfond Arena; Maine, Bangor Auditorium; Maine-Fort Kent.

MARYLAND (3): Maryland, Cole Field House; Baltimore Arena; Capital Centre.

NEW HAMPSHIRE (3): New Hampshire; Dartmouth; St. Anselm's.

WISCONSIN (3): Wisconsin, Field House; Milwaukee Arena; Bradley Center.

VIRGINIA (3): Old Dominion; Washington & Lee; Virginia Tech.

COLORADO (2): Denver, McNichols Arena; Colorado State.

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA (2): Verizon Center; George Washington.

KANSAS (2): Wichita Auditorium; Hutchinson Auditorium.

MICHIGAN (2): Michigan; University of Detroit.

MINNESOTA (2): Minnesota; Minneapolis Metrodome.

OREGON (2): Oregon; Oregon State.

TENNESSEE (2): East Tennessee; Tennessee.

WASHINGTON (2): Washington; Seattle Kingdome.

ARIZONA (1): Arizona.

ARKANSAS (1): Arkansas.

IOWA (1): Drake.

NEVADA (1): Reno Auditorium.

NEW MEXICO (1): New Mexico, The Pit.

VERMONT (1): Vermont.

VIRGIN ISLANDS (1): University of Virgin Islands (Paradise Jam).

Total: 161 (35 states, plus District of Columbia and US Virgin Islands).

Olympics

August 1, 1992

Johnson near just reward - oblivion

BARCELONA — Today at half past noon, Boston time, the track world, the athletic world and the world in general will be rid of a major irritant. Ben Johnson will have his butt kicked and his Olympic career will be over.

No one will care any longer about his whereabouts. He can stay in the Olympic Village, he can stay in downtown Barcelona, he can stay in Madrid, he can stay in Valencia, he can stay in Paris, he can stay in a youth hostel and no one will care anymore. He will be history and everyone concerned will be better off.

Oh, he's going down, all right. He came close to bidding us all a fond "adios" last evening, when he barely qualified to advance in the 100-meter dash by finishing fourth in his heat with a time of 10.30 seconds. In the morning heat, he finished second behind Nigeria's Davidson Ezinwa in 10.55.

"I'm just happy to be running again," he said following the morning heat. "I'm happy to be here. I make no promises. I feel no pressure."

Sure, Ben. There's no pressure on a guy who came away with one of the most prestigious prizes in all of sports four years ago, who was revealed to be a cheater with the capital "C" shortly thereafter, who was suspended for two years, who during his return has come back physically smaller — surprise! — and competitively far less proficient and who now is back trying to show the world that he can be just as good a sprinter without the help of the steroids as he was with them. Right, Ben. No pressure at all.

Ben was not particularly loquacious after the evening run. He blasted by the assembled multitudes and disappeared into the evening without even an official "no comment."

It was a bizarre scene at Estadi Olimpico. The gentlemen and ladies of the press don't normally concern themselves with reactions following routine sprint heats, but at the moment, there is no bigger macabre interest than the comings and goings and, if lucky, the utterances of the disgraced 1988 dash champion, a known user of anabolic steroids.

We are talking about a major mob scene following an innocuous sprint heat. Waiting to hear a word of wisdom from Mr. Johnson were 100 or more writers, radio and TV people from all over the world and at least 50 photographers. What we had to settle for were the thoughts of others.

"What kind of a guy is he?" someone asked Dennis Mitchell, who has been training with Johnson in Gainesville, Fla.

"Who can say?" responded Mitchell. "Everybody has his personality, I guess."

Mitchell, an acknowledged training junkie and true track intellectual, was good enough to share his expertise with the Canadian sprinter. He put Johnson on his own personal regimen and found that, at first, Johnson was simply not willing to pay the physical price. After a while, Johnson decided he would get with the program.

Now, Johnson was not the only culprit in this steroid mess. Suspended along with him was coach Charley Francis, who has been slapped with a lifetime ban. Johnson's official coach is supposed to be Percy Duncan, but it is an open secret that Francis is very much in the Johnson picture. Johnson has not been particularly careful about being seen with Francis. Just about everyone in the track world believes that Johnson is still getting his marching orders from Francis, the man who gave him the steroids in the first place.

Indeed, the question about what exactly is or isn't going into Johnson's body was raised after he ran a 10.16 this year in Montreal. True, it was only the 29th-best performance of the 1992 season, but it was far superior to the recent Johnson times. Some people insist he is still physically outsized, but that is not a universal opinion. For the record, this Globe envoy thinks he is noticeably smaller than he was in Seoul.

He ran his heat last evening in Lane 8. It was a tedious race, since there were no fewer than three false starts, the third of which was charged to Johnson.

Johnson did not, as we say, like the call. The gun sounded, Johnson and the other seven broke into their stride, and the gun sounded again. Johnson threw his hands up, stood defiantly in the middle of the track with his hands on his hip staring at the starter, then trudged angrily back to the blocks shaking his head.

Then the crowd at Estadi Olimpico got a look at the replay on the giant screen. If Johnson had left any earlier, he might have been to Portugal before anyone else got to the 50-meter mark.

Surely, Ben is on the final countdown now. The savvy planners here have stacked him in an impossible heat today. If he's going to advance, he's got to find a way to outrun Robson Caetano Da Silva, Linford Christie, Davidson Ezinwa, Chidi Imoh, Mitchell and a guy by the name of Leroy Burrell.

The Spanish basketball team has a better shot of beating the Dream Squad. Hit the road, Ben.



August 10, 1992

Team was a sweet Dream

BARCELONA — Dream Team. L'Equipe du Reve. Equipo de Ensueno. Tim Snova.

A unit for a total of 49 days, from the first night in La Jolla till the MGM Grand charter touched down in the USA yesterday morning, the Dream Team created indelible memories for itself while doing what outside forces asked it to do. Winning the gold medal was never an issue to anyone but the United States. Showing the rest of the basketball world - next to soccer/football, the second-largest sporting community on the planet - exactly where it stood and where it needed to go was the Dream Team's true mission.

Critics back in the States simply never understood that the rest of the world did not mind losing to The Greatest Team Ever Assembled by 40, 50 or even 60 points. The atmosphere in Barcelona was no different than the atmosphere in Portland for the Tournament of the Americas. The theme remained the same: Beat Me, Whip Me, Take My Picture.

Here is Brazil's delightful Oscar Schmidt after his team has lost to the US by 44 points, and he has had five shots blocked: "I loved it. They are my idols. I will remember this game for the rest of my life."

There was Lithuania's Arturas Karnisovas sitting on the sideline, taking pictures while the game was in progress. There was Argentina's Marcelo Milanesio, finding himself posted up by Magic Johnson, yelling for a teammate holding a movie camera to hurry up and get the picture.

To the world's players, coaches and fans, the American basketball stars were creatures from another planet who had come to demonstrate the beauty and scope of the game so they could learn and improve. They love basketball, and they want to get better. They dream of someday being at this level. Why is this basic, obvious and eminently laudable concept so difficult for so many Americans to grasp? Foreigners are truly puzzled when they hear that many people in the States objected to the Dream Team's presence.

The 1992 Olympics were merely a first step. “For the world basketball to grow and learn to play at the American level,” says Schmidt, “they must send more teams like this to the World Cup and the Pan Am Games.”

See? Playing against someone better is the fastest way to improve. Anyone who has ever had a big brother or sister knows this.

Any random assortment of the top 50 American players could have accomplished this mission, of course, but what made this experience unique was the particular makeup of the American team. There will be an unstoppable USA entry in Atlanta four years hence, but there will never again be a Dream Team. That idea had a copyright, and it expired when the final buzzer sounded at the Palau d’Esports de Badalona Saturday.

Chuck Daly more than once likened being with his team to “traveling with 12 rock stars” - the Spanish press was enraptured by the thought - and he wasn’t just playing with words. Michael Jordan, Magic Johnson and Larry Bird are more than just great basketball players. They are basketball royalty. These three have done more to put the NBA where it is today (nationally and globally) than all the previous players in league history put together, and it matters not even a little that of the three, only Jordan is in his prime. The presence of Bird and Magic gave true authenticity to the proceedings.

Daly recognized the Bird-Magic value immediately by appointing them cocaptains at the first practice in La Jolla. With eight championships, six MVP awards and a combined 22 All-Star Game appearances, who was going to argue?

The La Jolla week enabled these 12 mini-conglomerates to become a basketball team. Away from the court, they golfed. They played cards. They went out to dinner. They swapped stories. They talked trash. They discovered new things about each other. Who, for example, would ever have dreamed that Bird and Patrick Ewing would become blood brothers, or that the duo would become known as “Harry and Larry?”

It was like a high-class summer camp. As one player (who for perfectly obvious reasons shall remain nameless) observed, “The important thing was that there

weren't many women around. You didn't have to worry about going shopping or what time you were going to dinner. It was just hanging out with the guys, and that enabled us to come together a lot quicker."

In time the women and babies and mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers and old college roommates would arrive, but by then the basic bond had been established. By the time the boys left La Jolla and headed to Portland for the Tournament of the Americas, the marketing concept known as the Dream Team was a true basketball team and was ready to get down to the American half of the agenda, which was to win back a gold medal lost to the the now-defunct USSR back in Seoul four years ago. Or, as Charles Barkley put it, "to bring the medal back where it belongs."

Charles Barkley . . . where to begin?

On the court, Barkley proved to be the most dominant player of them all. Jordan chose to dole out occasional flashes of his brilliance (it was perfectly obvious, no matter what he said in the end, that he was more interested in playing exotic golf courses than anything else), but Barkley was relentless.

The international basketball set had never seen anything like this 6-foot-4-inch, 255-pound marauder. He averaged a point a minute through 14 games and the exhibition against the French, and he dazzled crowds with his patented coast-to-coast perambulations, his monster dunks and his vicious rebounds.

Barkley was a daily story. Golfing with Payne Stewart. Attending other events. Strolling La Rambla at 3 a.m. Elbowing a semi-emaciated Angolan and refusing to apologize for it. Yelling at the crowd and getting a technical from an official who thought the verbiage had been directed at him. Waving to the crowd upon hearing the whistles (European boos) when he entered the game. Taking on USOC public relations director Mike Moran on not one, but two subjects (his USA Today daily as-told-to reflection and the Nike-Reebok medal stand controversy). Firing back at United States chef de mission Leroy Walker about athletes living in the village. Proclaiming daily how he is a "black millionaire" and that entitles him to this, that, the other thing, etc. Barkley finished up by saying his gold medal was going to his

high school in Leeds, Ala., to prove that “if this fat black kid can make something of himself, another fat black kid from Leeds can, too.”

David Robinson summed up Barkley best by going Biblical on us. “It says in Scripture, ‘There is a way that seems right to a man,’ “ he said.

There isn’t much to analyze about the basketball this team played, other than to suggest that its best moments were actually hidden from the public. The average score from both Portland and Barcelona was 122-72. Michael hit a jumper, stole the ball and dunked. Barkley did whatever he wanted. Ewing and Robinson blocked shots and dunked. Scottie Pippen stole the ball, drove the floor and dunked. Clyde Drexler hit threes and, yes, dunked. Larry hit threes, made layups and threw touch passes we will not soon see again (regrettably, not all of them were caught). Chris Mullin spotted up for threes and scored layups off simple cuts.

Of the NBA Dreamers, only the Utah duo suffered professionally, John Stockton because he was not healthy and Karl Malone because he was dramatically overshadowed by Barkley. As for Christian Laettner, the longer the summer wore on, the more he became treated as the victory cigar. But he’ll have a lot to relate when the teacher asks for the annual “How I Spent My Summer Vacation” essay on the first day of school.

The most visible legacy of the team was its passing. There were moments when the ball sung arias as it passed from one set of marvelous hands to another. After watching the team beat Spain, assistant coach Mike Krzyzewski shook his head.

“People may say it’s overkill and all that,” said Coach K, “but there is no way anyone who professes to like basketball couldn’t appreciate that. Anyone who doesn’t is not a true basketball fan. You must understand what this team is doing, and its impact on the game. This is history - and we’ll be seeing the benefit of it for the next decade.”

Croatia pushed the Dream Team a little, but the absence of real competition - if any such thing exists - prevented the squad from playing the Ultimate Game. Maybe there never was a chance. Schmidt, an NBA aficionado from afar, suggested that if

the Dream Team played the next 12 best NBA players the Dream Team would win 10 games out of 10.

That's why its finest moments were behind closed doors. On July 21, the Dreamers played the French National Team at Monte Carlo. It was a sloppy, dreary game. The next day Daly had an excuse to practice them hard for a good 45 minutes before making them scrimmage. He did the same a day later.

Those two scrimmages were, by all accounts, spellbinding. The first was a 2-pointer and the second ended in a tie when a concerned Daly, fearful that "these guys might kill each other," came running in, waving his hands and saying it was time to shoot free throws.

"The most fun we had on the trip was playing against each other in those scrimmages," acknowledged Jordan. "It was a pickup atmosphere, with serious trash-talking."

"The greatest basketball I've ever seen," declared Magic.

Wow.

And yet Bird, the third member of basketball's Holy Trinity, disagrees. "I think our best basketball was against the college guys in San Diego," he said.

The circumstance: In the first game, the college development team beats the Dreamers, 88-80. The Dreamers thought they had been trying. The next day they arrive with game faces on and get off to a 30-2 start, with the 2 being free throws.

"Those kids opened our eyes pretty good," Bird recalls. "From that day on, we picked up."

The Dream Team picked up in more ways than one. It picked up the gold medal. It picked up the sport and put it on display for the rest of the world to inspect and savor, and it picked up the momentum and flung it forward.

"It will be a little tough for them to live up to our expectations in '96," Bird says. "There will never be anything like this again."

February 18, 1994

Media didn't need to practice overkill;

HAMAR, Norway — Come with me now as I take you step by step from wake-up to that hair-raising moment when Nancy and Tonya step on the ice simultaneously for the first time since The Big Whack.

6:50 a.m. Alarm goes off. Gotta hurry. Only 6 1/2 hours till the American practice begins.

8:00 a.m. Almost miss the bus. What would I do? I'd have to wait 55 minutes for another one and now we're down to just 5 1/2 hours till "Dueling Blades" commences.

10:00 a.m. Arrive at Hamar Olympic Ampitheatre. Countdown now T minus-3:25. Discover at least 20 people - almost all Americans - have already staked out viewing positions at the cozy practice rink where Skategate will resume. The Ampitheatre doors have opened at 6 a.m., and some say they have been here since then.

This can sometimes be a very weird business.

10:10 a.m. First rumor delivered, gist of which is that Nancy is said to be "fed up" with the media glare and will not be attending this practice session.

10:45 a.m. Two Germans and a Chinese girl take the ice. At least now there's something to look at.

10:50 a.m. Not much happening. Open up my international edition of USA Today to study weather map. Countdown at T minus-2:35. Plenty of time to memorize all world temperatures and convert same from Fahrenheit to Celsius.

11:05 a.m. Chinese medal hopeful Lu Chen starts whirling about the ice. Americans never look up.

11:15 a.m. Countdown at T minus-2:10 and press areas starting to fill up. Up till now, it's been "Hello, how ya doin'?" and smiles all around, but I'm thinking that the feeling of media goodwill will soon be evaporating.

11:30 a.m. Asked politely in words and gestures by a Chinese gentleman if I could put down my newspaper because it is blocking his colleague's camera lens. I realize the photographer standing at my immediate left is shooting Lu Chen's entire long program.

Lu skates elegantly and cleanly, and when she is done, so, too, are my new Chinese friends. The photographer breaks down his equipment and leaves. Lu Chen is done, and so are they. Nancy and Tonya Who?

There are 400, maybe 500 press people here, and these two are the only ones who have come specifically to see someone other than Nancy and Tonya.

"You know how we always say, 'Well, there's a billion Chinese who don't give a damn'?" inquires US journalist Tom Callahan. "I always thought that was just an expression."

11:40 a.m. Reading Celtics-Magic box score in my USA Today. Notice Shaq had 24 rebounds, 14 offensive. Thinking perhaps somebody might try to put a little body on him once in a while. T minus-1:45.

11:45 a.m. Who is standing down near the ice but Eddie Einhorn, the No. 2 ownership type of both the White Sox and the Bulls.

"What are you doing here?" he yells. "Why aren't you in Sarasota? Every sports reporter in America is either here or in Sarasota at the other circus."

11:50 a.m. Thumbing through the London Times. There is a Page 1 story headlined "RIVAL SKATERS TO BREAK THE ICE," but that's not even the good part.

Page 3 has color photos of Nancy (in full glide) and Tonya (a Big Hair head shot). The story is headlined "COLD FACTS ON THE ICE MAIDENS" and it's a pair of cheeky bios, is what it is.

A Tonya sample:

Best off-ice performance: Television programme in which she wept, explaining, "I want somebody to love me for me."

A Nancy sample:

Best off-ice performance: Before 1,000 reporters and photographers in Lillehammer, when she bit her lip and said she felt "wonderful."

Noon. Asked by Japanese photographer (he has taken the Chinese spot) to move newspaper since it is blocking lens as he tries to shoot man with microphone delivering a stand-up spiel way over to our right. I try to back up, but I can't move because another Japanese is crouched behind me doing God knows what.

12:40 p.m. Two skaters from Somewhere and Somewhere Else are whirling and spinning and jumping and, I suppose, axeling their little hearts out while 400-500 media types, now standing three deep on two levels, pay absolutely zero attention. Somebody is skating to "Get Me To The Church On Time," an arrangement and orchestration that sounds suspiciously like Lerner and Loewe meet Leroy Anderson, if you get my drift.

Countdown: T minus-45.

1:00 p.m. In the Great Boston/Reebok vs. Portland/Nike off-ice battle, the scoreboard reads four writers and one photographer present from Boston and two writers and one photographer present from Portland.

1:18 p.m. US Olympic Committee executive director Harvey Schiller spotted. So what if Tommy Moe is winning another medal up on the slopes? This is obviously the prestige venue. Why should the United States' head guy go to a real live event if he can participate in a good tabloid non-story like this one?

1:20 p.m. Nancy, clad in white (they say it's the same outfit she wore six weeks ago yesterday, the day of the Big Whack), arrives from the right. So much for the "fed up" rumor of hours ago.

1:22 p.m. Where's Tonya? Starting to remind me of the tension just prior to a heavyweight title fight.

1:34 p.m. Nine minutes late, Tonya and her entourage emerge from the left. She kisses a woman and steps onto the ice.

"Who was that woman she kissed?" asks one writer.

"It's either her mother or Mrs. Letterman," says another.

Tonya is wearing a blue USOC sweatshirt over black tights. She looks ready for touch football. Nancy looks like she's going to meet the queen.

After five minutes or so, Tonya removes sweatshirt to reveal a flowery one-piece outfit that looks as if it came from the remainders table at the Almy's going-out-of-business sale. (I swear on the Bible, the Koran and the Torah I'd say that even if Tonya came from Woburn.)

The two go through their skating paces and not once does either acknowledge the other's existence. Both spend a great deal of time chatting with their respective coaches, or, in Tonya's case, her mentor du jour. When Nancy skates her program, Tonya stands with her back to the rink. When Tonya skates her program, Nancy stands with her back to the rink. Each occasionally skates idly into a corner in the middle of the other's program. Tonya, the asthmatic, coughs repeatedly and goes heavy on the throat spray, or the Primatene, or something.

There is one moment when the two come within a couple of feet of each other, and this is the moment all the photographers are waiting for. Despite repeated warnings that flashes are forbidden, the rink becomes one giant flashbulb.

2:00 p.m. Nancy leaves. Security rivals Arafat's at the United Nations.

2:07 p.m. Tonya skates up to a beautiful skater clad in white and hugs her. No, Nancy has not returned for a rapprochement. Tonya is hugging South Korean Lily Lee.

2:10 p.m. Tonya leaves. Photographers ask for a wave and she gives them one. Just one.

The Sixth Game of the '75 Series or the Beanpot final it ain't. But I must say I've never been to a more exciting batting practice. If you'll pardon the expression.

February 23, 1994

Locals were loopy for relay, but Italians stole the stage

LILLEHAMMER, Norway — First I heard that the 120-meter ski jump was the Big One, i.e. the single most eagerly anticipated event by the Norwegian fans.

And they packed the Lysgaardsbakkene Ski Jump Arena last Sunday; they surely did.

Then I heard, nah, the rrrreally Big One is the 10,000-meter men's speedskating race, with national hero Johann Olav Koss going for a third Lillehammer gold and a third world record.

And they made that event a very tough ticket down at the Viking Ship; they surely did.

But then I heard, hey, the other events were big, but you haven't seen the truly Big One yet. The Big One, the really truly ultra Big One, is the 40-kilometer cross-country relay race at the Birkebeineren Ski Stadium. You want Big, that's where you must go.

So I went.

And I must tell you it was Big.

Capacity at Birkebeineren is flexible, somewhere between 30,000 and 35,000. We had capacity. Then throw in the official estimate of 70,000 out on the 5-kilometer course (keeping in mind, of course, that many of these people are living out there, free of charge, in tents for the entire two weeks).

This was the first Olympic event to sell out. The waiting list had 204,000 names. That's two-oh-four-thousand.

It didn't hurt that the home team was the favorite. Coach Inge Braten trotted out a relay quartet whose race-time personal resumes included six career golds and one silver. It was alleged to be nothing less than a Dream Team of cross-country skiing, led by national dignitaries Vegard Ulvang (who took the Olympic oath) and anchor man Bjorn (Hello) Dahlie (who carried the Norwegian flag).

Competition was expected from the Finns and Italians, but competition only. With Dahlie, already in possession of two '94 golds and a '94 silver, skating (yes, skating, the freestyle form is referred to as skating) the anchor leg, the adoring Norwegian fans felt safe.

The 4 x 10-kilometer relay is a marathon with frostbite. Everyone gets to stand around for an hour and 40 minutes, watching whichever sliver of the race crosses in front of his or her eyes, while keeping track of the race via various big screens or radio commentary. Those in the stadium area get constant public-address chatter, delivered in about 80 percent Norwegian and 20 percent English.

There are cheerleaders to get the crowd in the proper spirit and there are bands and there is impromptu singing (there seems to be a Norwegian song for every conceivable occasion, and each one of the country's 4.2 million citizens knows them all). And then there is Mr. Announcer, who is very much a part of the show.

"Tight, tight, tight . . . it can't have more exciting than this!" he exuded when Italy, Norway and Finland kept swapping leads during the second leg.

"Dahlie is pulling away . . . The Finns have a problem!" he informed an audience who would find the latter news very enjoyable indeed.

When anchor titans Dahlie of Norway and Silvio Fauner of Italy kept exchanging positions during some large-scale tactical maneuvering, Mr. Announcer was enthralled. "It's very interesting to see what happens on the last lap," he said. "Silvio Fauner is a great sprinter."

Somewhere around the 38- or 38 1/2-kilometer mark, Mr. Announcer made his final declaration. “We’re going to have a sprint finish for the gold medal!” he roared.

And so we did. Fauner passed Dahlie on a curve, and when the two entered the stadium he was a stride ahead of the great local hero. Mr. Announcer was correct. Silvio Fauner is a great sprinter. Dahlie huffed and puffed, but even the presence of his cheering fans made no difference. Fauner flashed across the finish line 0.4 of a second ahead of Dahlie.

The Norwegians and Italians had never been more than 5 meters apart for 40 kilometers, and at the end Fauner finished a half-stride ahead of Dahlie. It was the closest finish in the event’s Olympic history. Finland took the bronze.

“With 100 meters left, maybe 50, I wanted to go quite fast to beat him to the finish line,” said Dahlie. “But, as you saw, it was not so easy the last 100 meters.”

“I’ve beaten him a couple of times before with sprints,” said Fauner, “but he’s also beaten me the same way. So you might say things even out. Just one click of the eye could be the difference.”

The order was a reverse of the 1992 Albertville finish, and it was a glorious triumph for the Italians, most of all for 43-year leadoff man Maurilio De Zolt. This fellow is a rather amazing story, having begun serious competition in this grueling sport at age 27, having made his Olympic debut in Lake Placid at age 29 and having made a success of himself in his chosen field despite his Spud Webbish physique.

Indeed, De Zolt’s nickname is “Grillo,” from a small insect-like creature that comes out in the night and which then chirps and hops about until the a.m. Or so my friendly Italian references say.

The Lillehammer Olympics are a semi-official Last Hurrah for De Zolt. “A couple of years ago I said to myself, ‘That’s enough.’ But there was one more chance to get a medal here. I had achieved much more than I ever thought I would, but I did not have a gold medal. He has silvers from both the Calgary and Albertville 50 Ks. So, of course, I am relieved. The 50 K is not my favorite distance, and now I have my medal.”

Now it is time to think about retiring. “Seventeen years is enough,” he said. “That’s the end of it.”

The Norwegian fans were disappointed, but, unlike the typical Red Sox narcissistic follower, they didn’t take it personally. They applauded the Italians. They applauded the Finns. They even stuck around long enough to applaud American anchorman Luke Bodensteiner when he outkicked Japan’s Masaaki Koizu in the final 100 meters to take 13th place and thus save Team USA the ignominy of finishing last.

As the fans headed back down the mountain toward town, many on skis, they were looking ahead, already talking about Sunday’s 50 K event.

A lot of people around here say that’s the Big One.

July 24, 1996

Invincible wrestler holds his grip - barely

ATLANTA — Captain Ahab had a shot at a wounded Great White Whale.

Captain Ahab came up with the dry throat and the sweaty palms. The Great White Whale lives.

“Matt had an opportunity this time that he didn’t use,” cooed Aleksandr Karelin.

“I was nervous,” conceded Matt Ghaffari. “I went to the bathroom 10 times. Nerves had a lot to do with it. If you wrestle 98-99 percent you’re better off than if you try to wrestle 110 percent. I was forcing things.”

This may be the most compelling single person-to-person one-way rivalry in the Centennial Olympics. American 130-kilogram (i.e. Very Large People) Greco-Roman wrestler Matt Ghaffari doesn’t just respect and admire Siberian wrestling demi-god Aleksandr Karelin. He is obsessed with him. He carries the Siberian’s picture in his wallet. He has a poster of the legendary champion in his room. Ghaffari is 34 years old. He is 6 feet 4 inches and weighs 285 and change, depending

on what he had for breakfast. And when he grows up, he wants to be Aleksandr Karelin.

Ghaffari has never beaten Karelin. No one has since Karelin began wrestling internationally nine years ago. He lost to a Russian when he was just learning his trade, but in the last nine years the man has had an Edwin Moses/Cuba baseball/Westwood High girls' basketball/reverse Susan Lucci thing going on. The surest thing in international sport is that if you draw Karelin in a match, you will lose. If Vegas bookies took action on Greco-Roman wrestling, Karelin would be off the board every night. The only thing you'd get would be over/under on the pin time, or maybe — maybe — a little action on whether or not someone might score a point.

What accounts for this?

“Take a look at him,” suggests American coach Rob Hermann.

To say that he is himself 6-4 and 285 is merely a starting point. He is, as they say around Gold's, cut. Ripped. Put together. Massive thighs. Massive chest. Massive arms. Massive hands. Massive head, out of which stare a pair of deep-set eyes that appear capable of staring into your soul. He has been described as “perhaps the most intimidating man in the entire Olympics,” and that would just about sum him up.

I mean, the guy weighed 15 pounds at birth!

Well, not quite.

“It's like wrestling King Kong,” suggests Ghaffari, whose 1-0 loss in the gold medal match yesterday was his 13th setback officially. He also has lost at least another seven or eight times in exhibition sites ranging from a parking lot in Concord, Calif., to Karelin's hometown of Novosibirsk. “I've always thought that if you want to wrestle Aleksandr Karelin, you've got to teach a couple of techniques to the strongest animal on earth, and that's a big gorilla.”

More than mere strength, agility and an almost incomprehensible level of conditioning separates Karelin from any other Greco-Roman wrestler in history. And talk about mortal lock observations: The guy has won six world championships and

the last three gold medals. At 28, the tyranny could be extended for two more Olympics and eight more world championships, easy.

“He is the complete psychological master,” contends Hermann. “Nothing which happens out there bothers him. He wins matches before they even occur. Wrestlers have been known to lose in advance so they wouldn’t have to face him.”

Despite all this, Ghaffari and Hermann truly believed the great man was vulnerable yesterday.

“He is not the same man he was a year ago,” Ghaffari declared after advancing to the gold medal match with a relatively easy dispatch of Germany’s Rene Scheikel. “I see chinks.”

“I really feel Matt feels he can beat him,” agreed Hermann. “I think history might be made tonight.”

You know why they were so optimistic? It’s because Karelin had shoulder surgery in April; that’s why. He was here competing in pain. They knew it. Every opponent knew it. Moby Dick had an owie. No wonder Ghaffari thought this was his big chance.

The wrestling community knew what was going on. They knew that the great man actually needed a bogus call in order to get the only points in his 2-0 overtime victory over Moldova’s Sergei Moureiko the day before.

Overtime?

The great man had been forced into OT only once in all those nine years. That was against our man Ghaffari a number of years ago. The great man doesn’t do OT. He seldom does the allotted five minutes. In Barcelona, for example, he needed the full five to defeat Finland’s Juha Ahoska in his first match and then toyed with his next four in the elapsed time of 5:32. So, yeah, sure, Ghaffari figured that if Karelin was going into OT against the Moldovan he just might have a chance to slay the Great White Whale and pick up a surprise gold medal.

The 1-0 score says he came close. Captain Ahab was disappointed in the final result but happy to have done so well. The Great White Whale had another viewpoint.

“It was a difficult medal to win, because I didn’t prepare as well as I could,” he said. “It is not that the others are catching up to me. I have just been standing still. The injury cost me three months of training. No more, no less. I did win by only 2 points and 1 point here, but I do believe there’s a future for me. I still feel the pain in my arm, and when it goes, I can do better still.”

The Great White Whale is an expert on successful Olympic experiences and he can now evaluate one in which music continually blares out in that quaint American way.

“The music is particularly appropriate when you leave the platform,” he observed, “and you are with the shield and not on the shield, as the ancient Greeks used to say.”

Matt Ghaffari might be in trouble if knowledge of the ancient Greeks is any criteria for defeating Aleksandr Karelin.

“I just know that competing against him has made me a better athlete,” Ghaffari says. “Some day I want to rise to his level.”

Either that, or wrestle him when he’s coming off two shoulder surgeries.

August 6, 1996

A vote for the Olympic experience: Here, here

ATLANTA — There is an entire Olympics out there that NBC can’t show you. No one can be everywhere, not even a network. No one can ingest everything an Olympics has to offer.

Did you see the Puerto Rican fans forming a conga line — a long conga line — at halftime of their ninth/10th-place basketball game against Argentina?

Did you see Greco-Roman wrestler Derrick Waldroup announce his retirement from competition in the classic way, by leaving his empty shoes in the center of the mat and then taking a triumphant lap around the arena?

Did you see American badminton ace Kevin Han lose his first-round match because he was unable to cope with the DACE — the Dreaded Air Conditioning Effect?

Did you see the South Korean fans cheering on their judo folk, their wrestlers and their table tennis stars while banging together their little plastic yellow bats known as bang mangis?

Did you hear Worcester's own feisty 72-year-old Ralph Raymond, coach of the victorious US softball team, break into an on-key rendition of "Unforgettable" when asked to "give us a song" at the gold-medal press conference?

Did you hear the Gaelic-speaking Irish journalist launch into a lengthy question/comment to swimmer (and suspected hanky-pankier) Michelle Smith, in the middle of which he turned toward the Americans and spat out the words "sour grapes"?

Did you see and hear the four orange-clad Dutch fans (among the many hundreds) cheering on their volleyball team against Italy in the gold-medal match (eventually won by the Netherlands in five exhausting sets, the fifth being 17-15 after Italy was serving at 15-14 for the match) by doing the tomahawk chop?

Did you hear US assistant basketball coach Clem Haskins exclaim after watching 17-year-old Chinese center Wang Zhi-Zhi, "How do you say, 'Come to Minnesota,' in Chinese?"?

And most importantly . . .

Did you see the shoulder-to-shoulder mass of humanity enjoying the concerts and other attractions at Centennial Park on both Friday and Saturday last? Bomb, what bomb?

I didn't think so.

As a former nonbeliever, I am here to tell you the following: The Olympics truly are the Greatest Show On Earth, and to have them in your backyard is a gift. I'm just a pup in this journalistic litter, with three Olympic notches on the belt, but it is clear to me that, properly done, the Olympics give back far more to a community than they take. Surely there have been enough examples of both the Hows (Barcelona) and How Not Tos (Montreal) for people to figure out the proper formula.

Are they a general pain in the butt? Do they disrupt the daily life of a city? Well, sure. Few cities on earth easily can absorb the influx of so many visitors with so many specific needs, and the ones that can are almost by definition not suitable to host the Olympics. I love New York, for example, but New York never should have a major anything because New York invariably will swallow up whatever it is and render it less significant than it really is. Final Fours and political conventions don't belong in New York, and neither does an Olympics. On the other hand, imagine The World taking over Central Park . . .

The Olympics must be streamlined to some degree, and the Sydney organizers will be pressuring the International Olympic Committee to make sure that fewer competitors show up four years hence. Say they go from 10,500 to 10,000. The cut would be even bigger than that because with each couple of athletes there always seems to be a couple of guys in blazers hanging around.

The IOC is like our two major political parties in that it is constantly bombarded by special-interest groups. Take my sport. No, take my sport. We already have the quasi-lunacy of rhythmic gymnastics (is it the IOC's fault that "The Ed Sullivan Show" went off the air 25 years ago?) and now we must brace ourselves for snowboarding and curling in Nagano and (gulp) ballroom dancing in Sydney. What's next? Ironing? Typing? Parking?

The Olympics are a phenomenal undertaking. The logistics are staggering, and it only begins with construction of a sports venue. Housing, food, transportation and communications are biggies, but there is much, much more, and the ultimate success of the Olympics depends on the spirit and capability of the volunteers, and this is something no Billy Payne can control. Security? So? Security is a fact of modern life. We must go on living. Security can be dealt with.

The Olympics I have seen galvanize the city and the region. It takes a couple of days, but before long people get into it. The locals start to like hearing the strange accents and seeing the colorful garb of the international visitors, who, in turn, latch onto each other as spiritual kin. Pin-swapping, shirt- and hat-selling, tall tale-swapping ("Did you hear what happened at the volleyball?" "Yeah, well let me tell you about the little weightlifter . . .") become the norm. And if the locals are doing well (trust me when I say that Norway came to a stop), the air is crackling.

You may or may not know that for the past four years an entity known as the Boston Organizing Committee has been in existence. Its goal is to have the 2008 Olympics here. This being Boston, most people just roll their eyes.

The very idea of having an Olympics in Boston really is stupid. We are, after all, America's leading Can't Do city. While other cities, when presented with an idea, immediately say, "OK, we are going to do it. How can we make it work?" (Phoenix springs to mind), the typical Boston/Massachusetts response to anything is, "Can't do that, can't do that, can't do that, and where's mine?"

The fact is there are four large American cities with the right combination of beauty and inherent resources to welcome an Olympics. There is Seattle, there is Chicago, there is San Francisco (another fractious locale) and there is, yes, Boston.

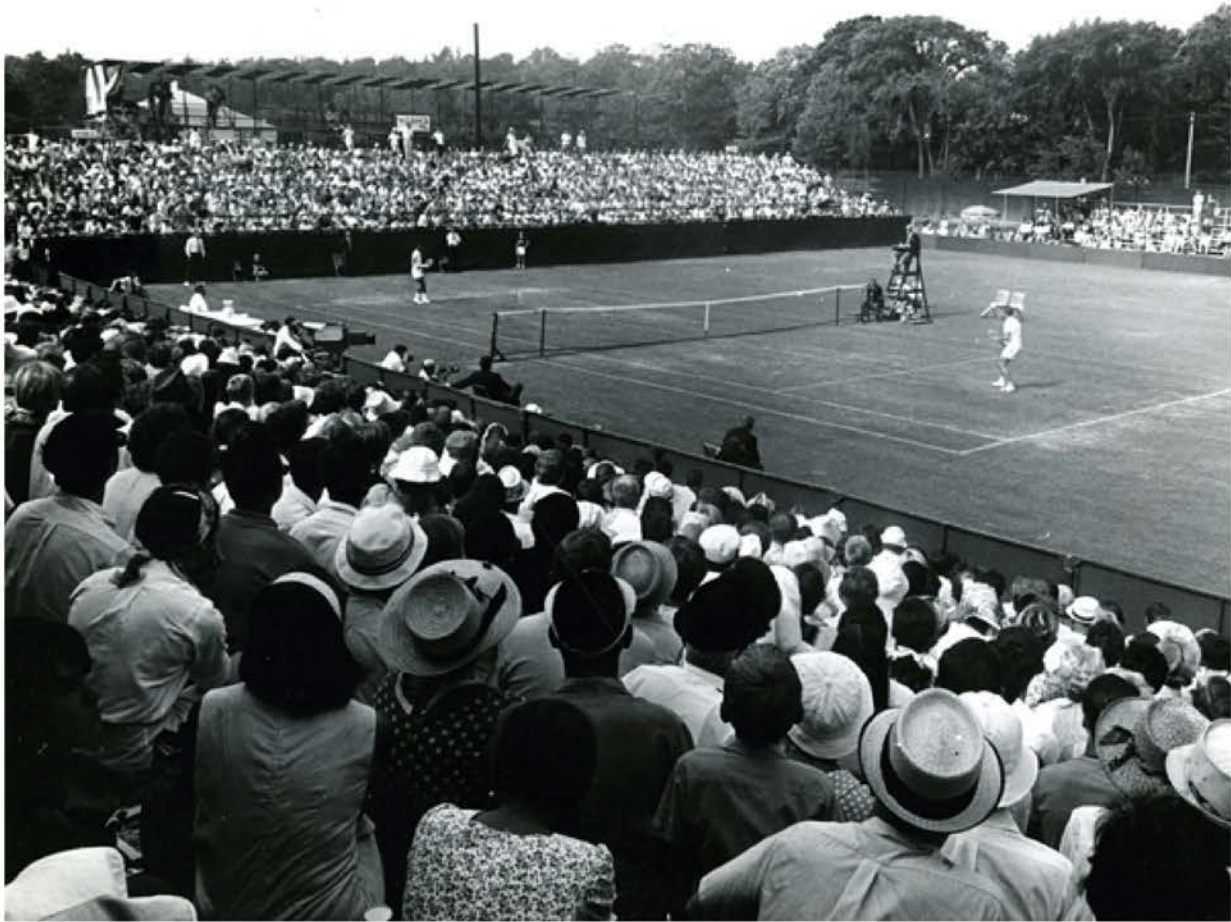
So we don't have a stadium? You think maybe in 12 years we could figure out a way to get one? You feel the Toonerville Trolley known as the Green Line might be a wee bit inadequate? We've got 12 years to rectify that. Other than that, what? We've got the FleetCenter. We've got the Charles and Boston Harbor. We've got the ballpark, and, most of all, we've got our magnificent colleges, which could be utilized for soccer, water polo, boxing, judo and many others.

If custom prevails, the 2008 Olympics will be awarded in 2000 or 2001. Isn't that long enough to do what should have been done a long time ago with our underutilized waterfront? Isn't that long enough for even some of our slow-thinking (if you'll pardon the expression) political leaders to join forces with our business movers and shakers to formulate a serious plan to showcase a completely logical and appropriate place to hold an Olympics?

People flocked to Atlanta, which, to be polite, is ugly and soulless. Atlanta could never be a Boston physically. An Olympics would rejuvenate Boston and guarantee it as a tourist destination for the next two or three centuries. An Olympics are worth fighting for.

Go ahead, laugh, but only if you've never been to an Olympics. Ask any friend or relative of yours who has. They know I'm right.

Other Sports



June 12, 1968

Newcombe Happy to Play Pancho

Take a man who a short time ago was hailed as king of the amateur tennis world and who is now regarded as a brilliant young pro. Pit him against the old master, the veteran champ who has seen it all, and won it all. What you've got is a classic tennis battle, and it will take place tomorrow afternoon (4:30 p.m.) in the first round of the U.S. Professional tennis tournament at Longwood Cricket Club.

The youngster is 24-year-old Australian John Newcombe, the 1967 Wimbledon and Forest Hills champion, who turned pro in January. The veteran is Richard "Pancho" Gonzales, now 40 years old, but still a formidable player.

“I’m really looking forward to it,” says Newcombe. “Win or lose, I could learn a lot just by playing him.” Whereas Gonzalez once blasted his way through opponents with tennis’ most feared serve, it is expected that he will try to out-finesse his younger opponents with his vast assortment of tricks.

For Newcombe, the road to Longwood is the culmination of a career which began as a seven-year-old by in Sydney, Australia. He was a Davis Cup performer at 17.

After seven successful amateur years, in which he competed in five Davis Cups, became part of the world’s best doubles team (with Tony Roche), and became the world’s best amateur in 1967, he accepted a tempting offer to turn pro from Al Hill’s World Championship outfit.

“I had two ambitions as an amateur,” Newcomb said, “First, to play for the Davis Cup, and secondly, to win the Wimbledon title.

Newcomb is enthusiastic about the future of professional tennis, now that Open Tennis has been initiated, and the big money is available. “The Americans may even surpass the Australians in time,” he said. “Some American boys will now have an incentive to play tennis, perhaps, instead of baseball or football.”

The one step remaining for pro tennis to take, says Newcombe, is the establishment of separate American, European, Australian, and South African tournament circuits, under the supervision of one ruling body. With that step, pro tennis would finally be secure, he believes.

Newcombe likes the United States enough to take a post as a pro at a tennis ranch in San Antonio, Tex. He will eventually phase himself out of the tour if the ranch goes well. He has already made his home there with his German-born wife Angelika.

His game is a pressing power game which features a powerful serve. The Gonzales match may well turn into a cat-and-mouse game, with Pancho utilizing lobs attempting to keep the youngster off-balance.

Pre-tourney favorite Rod Laver takes on Frenchman Pierre Barthes at 1. Second-seeded Ken Rosewall plays England's Roger Taylor, and Barry MacKay goes against Nicki Tilic of Yugoslavia to complete the first round.

March 17, 1991

Title came wrapped in a small package

Lee, Mass., is an unlikely place for tyrants to live.

Tucked into the Berkshires, not far from Lenox and not all that far from Pittsfield, Lee could almost be described as "bucolic." It's a small-town slice of Americana, is what it is, but this Rockwellian town is a very dangerous place, harboring a band whose iron will has imposed itself unyieldingly on fellow citizens of the commonwealth for three long years.

Their leader is ruthless, always attacking and never retreating. Truly a ubiquitous presence, this terror sees things others do not, following unseen and unspoken orders from an outside force as if equipped with a radio receiver. In truth, great study and planning are the reasons for this display of power.

This terrifying group is the Lee High School girls' basketball team. The leader is 5-foot-2-inch junior point guard Katie Cinella. The outside force is her father, Tom Cinella. He coaches the team.

He has coached the girls' team for three years. Yesterday's 55-36 trampling of Notre Dame Academy (Tyngsboro) means his team has now won the Division 3 state championship three years in succession.

"We had many goals," explained center Shannon Driscoll, who bludgeoned Notre Dame for 20 points and 13 rebounds. "But winning the state championship again was the biggest."

And the hardest. The Lee Wildcats were the UNLV of Massachusetts basketball. As two-time defending champions returning a powerful frontcourt duo and directed

by the crafty Cinella, they were the best preseason bet anywhere in the state. But when you're in that circumstance, you must deal with the dreaded P-word.

"There was pressure this year," pointed out forward Jessie McManmon (17 points, 6 rebounds). "From fans, parents and all of Berkshire County."

It's a typical small-town scenario. These kids start playing together anywhere from the fifth to the seventh grade. They play together in the summer. Actually, they do everything together.

"Since we live in a small town," explained McManmon, "we tend to stay together."

Tom Cinella, Boston College '62, coached the boys for many years before taking over the girls' program. Not that many differences, he claims. Well, maybe one.

"Sometime that first year," he recalled, "I asked one of them very forcefully to box out. There were some tears. But I've had a few boys break down, too."

He installed the same type of pressure defense he'd always used, and that is the Wildcat calling card today. Lee harassed previously unbeaten Notre Dame into travels, a double dribble and some passes to the tuba player. With the 6-foot Driscoll guarding the nest, Notre Dame missed bushels of layups and wound up shooting a dismal 21 percent (12 for 56).

Driscoll and McManmon dominated the inside, the former with solid post-up moves and aggressive offensive rebounding, the latter with slashing drives. They accounted for 37 of the 55 Wildcat points.

But the motor was Katie Cinella. She didn't shoot much (5 points), but she bullwhipped this team into shape, following her coach/daddy's instructions before he could manage to spit them out.

"She has a true point guard mentality," declared the mentor.

Cinella brought the ball up against Notre Dame's press, she told this one to go here and that one to go there, and she got the ball to the Big Two on cue. "Her entry passes," said Driscoll, "are perfect."

But what she was really born to do is press, aggravate and irritate. Her quickness and feistiness make her a major defensive presence. Early in the game, she caught Notre Dame's Elizabeth Davies on a clean sneakaway and caused a turnover by a strip that went off the Notre Dame girl and out of bounds. It was a 6 o'clock highlight play.

Coach Cinella's got himself a prodigy for a daughter, and you've got to wonder if he ever imagined 27 years ago, in an entirely different societal circumstance, if he would wind up coaching a team to a state championship led by his daughter, and not his son.

He kind of ducked out of that one, reminding inquisitors only that he had, in fact, coached his son, Peter, a subsequent Western New England College star who is now his assistant. "That gave me practice," he said.

Katie was a sixth man (woman, whatever) on the 1989 title team (Good Lord, what was she . . . 4-8?) and a key member of last year's squad. A year ago, her primary role in the championship game was to smother Seekonk star Kim Lynch. Yesterday she just basically had to play basketball, which she does very well.

They all play so well that few can ever give them a game. That's why coach Cinella prepped for the Division 3 tournament by booking scrimmages against the likes of Southwick (and the legendary Rebecca Lobo), Springfield Cathedral, Agawam and Longmeadow. "That really helped us," he said. "A lot of our starters only play a half in most of our games."

A half is usually enough to inflict sufficient damage. We're talking about Lee, Mass., where, thanks to these girls, the town motto has become, "You wanna make somethin' of it?"

November 7, 1993

Parachutist makes it a circus ring

LAS VEGAS — This never happened at the good old Madison Square Garden.

There, by God, a fight was a fight. Well, sure, you might have a few bottles and chairs thrown around after an unpopular decision, but never did a postfight analysis include discussion of preparachute and postparachute.

But this is Las Vegas, which bills itself as the “Entertainment Capital of the World.” In Las Vegas we come to expect that little something extra, and we most definitely got it last night when a Para-Glider came crashing into the ring during the seventh round of the Riddick Bowe-Evander Holyfield heavyweight championship bout at Caesars Palace last night.

The sport of boxing has often had that mondo bizarro quality to it, but this bout now moves to the top of the list. We know this much: no one will confuse the night Evander Holyfield regained his title with any other heavyweight bout in their experience.

The boxing aspect was good enough to recommend this as a sensational night of entertainment. When, after all, is the last time championship aspirants simply ignored a bell and kept pounding away for a good 10-12 seconds after a round had ended, as these two did in the fourth, a round that did not end until Emanuel Steward came racing out of the Holyfield corner to pull his charge away?

And when did a championship fight end with the two combatants again whaling away at each other, forcing Steward into an even more amazing decision? This time Holyfield’s trainer tackled his man. Then, and only then, was the evening’s entertainment concluded.

The man in the parachute had been seen hovering over the premises for upwards of 45 minutes. No one had any idea what he was doing up there in his aerial device. No one yet knows. What is known is that midway through the seventh round the parachute man started to descend. Rapidly. He came in over the bleachers behind the Bowe corner and headed directly toward the ring.

“I saw the parachute man coming in and I didn’t know what was happening,” said Holyfield, now 30-1. “I just wanted to get out of the way.”

The man crashed into the ropes to the left of Bowe’s corner. There would be no boxing for the next 21 minutes. It was boxing’s answer to a rain delay. While the parachutist and the other injured were tended to and the parachute was extracted from its resting place on the top of the ring superstructure, the fighters were left to their thoughts on this very chilly (that’s correct, chilly) evening. Bowe donned a heavy robe and wrapped himself in two blankets. Holyfield slipped his robe around his shoulders.

Bowe looked concerned, and he had every reason to be. He had already lost control of the fight. After winning the first round, he found himself confronted with a very skilled and determined opponent. By the fourth round his face was bloody. He really was knocked around in the fifth. He clearly was sucking wind by the sixth.

But that wasn’t his only problem. In the midst of the parachute commotion, his wife, Judy, four months pregnant, fainted. He fought the rest of the bout knowing that she was in a hospital. He had good reason to be distracted.

Yet the big delay was also a blessing. It gave him 21 precious minutes to regroup physically. He was an exhausted man at the conclusion of Round 6.

That being the case, Holyfield again gets incredibly high marks for being a sportsman. If anyone was hurt by this interruption, it was Holyfield. The fight was his at that point. Now he had to crank it up all over again.

“We had two fights tonight,” Holyfield said. “We had a six-rounder, and then we had another six-rounder. It gave us both an opportunity to be fresh. I tried to use it to my advantage.”

The people most shaken up by the parachutist were the judges. This was a much closer fight in their judgment than in the eyes of unofficial ringside observers. The three judges were in agreement on nine of the 12 rounds. Rounds 2 and 11 were split, with two judges giving them to Holyfield and two giving them to Bowe.

But there was only one round in which the judges disagreed violently, and guess which round that was? Yup, the seventh.

Judge Jerry Roth gave it to Holyfield. Judge Chuck Giampa gave it to Bowe. Finally, judge Patricia Jarman called it even. Had she given it to Bowe, her final card would have been 115-115 and the fight would have been called a draw.

The truth is, how could anyone accurately judge the seventh round? No matter what type of notes you took before the intruder came crashing into the ring, a round often is decided on feel, and who could have a proper feel for a round with a 21-minute Para-Glider delay?

So there is something to be said for fighting indoors, instead of doing it on converted parking lots. But nature has intervened in boxing matches before. Boxing Illustrated publisher Bert Randolph Sugar points out that Nonpareil Jack Dempsey was once fighting on a beach and when the tide came in a bit quicker and higher than expected they moved to another beach.

All I know is that this stuff never happened in the good old Garden.

November 21, 1993

Kicker was in perfect spot to be the hero

SOUTH BEND, IND. — David Gordon says it was like a long extra point.

The ball was on the Notre Dame 24-yard line and it was smack in the middle of the field. There were 5 seconds left and Boston College was trailing by 1 point. This wasn't like the (ugh) Northwestern game, when he was asked to win the game with a 40-yarder from the left hash mark and wound up hooking it wide right.

"I had confidence in him," said Eagles coach Tom Coughlin. "The ball was in the middle of the field, and he is an excellent direct-on kicker." But this was going to be a 41-yarder, and David Gordon had never kicked one that long in a game before. And this wasn't just any ol' game. This was Boston

College at Notre Dame — NOTRE DAME! — and No. 1 Notre Dame, at that. And this wasn't just any ol' BC at Notre Dame game, either, because this was 5 seconds away from being a Notre Dame fourth-period comeback for which they would have commissioned five new videos by sunrise.

David Gordon knew the game would come down to him. The walk-on. The rich kid. The one whose father is managing partner of the Hartford Whalers. The kid who got into serious kicking in the first place because Roger Staubach himself had offered the encouragement.

BC had taken the ball over on its 25 with 1:01 left, trailing, 39-38, after once leading by a 38-17 score. "I know our offense," Gordon shrugged. "We score on the two-minute drill in practice all the time."

Glenn Foley & Co. made it all look very easy. Bing, bang, boom, and the ball was at the Notre Dame 33 with 12 seconds remaining. Then Foley hit Ivan Boyd on a little screen pass and Boyd lugged the ball from right-to-left, depositing the pigskin on the ND 24. He could not have done David Gordon a better favor had he called time out and placed the ball where it was by hand.

"Boyd's play was huge," Gordon saluted. So now the game would come down to David Gordon. The walk-on. The rich kid. "I knew I could make plays," he said. "I just get so few attempts."

Up in the stands Richard and Dee Gordon were agonizing. They had one thought on their mind: Northwestern.

"Can you imagine any kid, or the parent, in a situation like this?" inquired Richard Gordon. "Your son is out there with a chance to beat the No. 1 team in the country. It was pretty hard to watch."

Northwestern. The thought was lurking in the back of David Gordon's mind, too.

"A minute left," Gordon recalled. "Ball hiked from the 23-yard line. Left hash mark. I didn't make it. Believe me, I never felt worse in my life."

A kicker must put such thoughts out of his mind, however, and Gordon says he went onto the field thinking only positive thoughts. The Notre Dame field is grass — the only BC game on grass all season — and Gordon is very comfortable on grass. “I kick on it all summer,” he pointed out.

Remember where he was. Notre Dame. This was No. 1 Notre Dame thinking about winning another national championship, and the only thing standing in its way was a left-footed transfer (Vermont) expatriate soccer player who has only had one previous chance to be a hero, and who could not deliver.

David Gordon was being asked to rectify 10 horrible minutes that would have haunted BC forever. When Foley hit Pete Mitchell with a 1-yard touchdown pass with 11:03 remaining, BC was up, 38-17. Then Notre Dame scored three touchdowns in less than five minutes and BC was on the verge of its most crushing defeat ever. David Gordon says none of this occurred to him as he trotted onto the field.

“Make that kick,” he declared. “That’s all I was thinking.”

He had missed a 40-yarder in the first half, but he said that really had no bearing on anything. They didn’t get into it quickly enough. It just wasn’t a smooth sequence. And it was also from the left of center. This one was perfectly located.

The snap was high. Foley made a nice grab and then came the difficult part. He had to get it down to give Gordon a chance for a decent kick.

“It was all right,” Gordon said. “As long as he gets it down fast, I can kick it. I just can’t be slow.”

The hold was crucial. Give Glenn Foley a huge assist on this one.

David Gordon kicked the ball, and it wasn’t one for the training film. “It was kind of a knuckleball. I hit it a little bit too much with the toe, and not with the foot. I like to try to hit them perfect every time.”

He says this despite the fact he never watched it. He kept his head down on his follow through. The ball didn’t look as if it had enough altitude at first, but then it

sort of gained strength. Halfway there it was drifting right, and if the ball is pulling to the right off the foot of a lefty, the cause is usually lost. Somehow the ball changed course, drifting back to the left.

He didn't know it was good until he saw Foley raise his arms. Then, and only then, did David Gordon realize he had just delivered what can be considered the biggest victory in Boston College's 100-year football history.

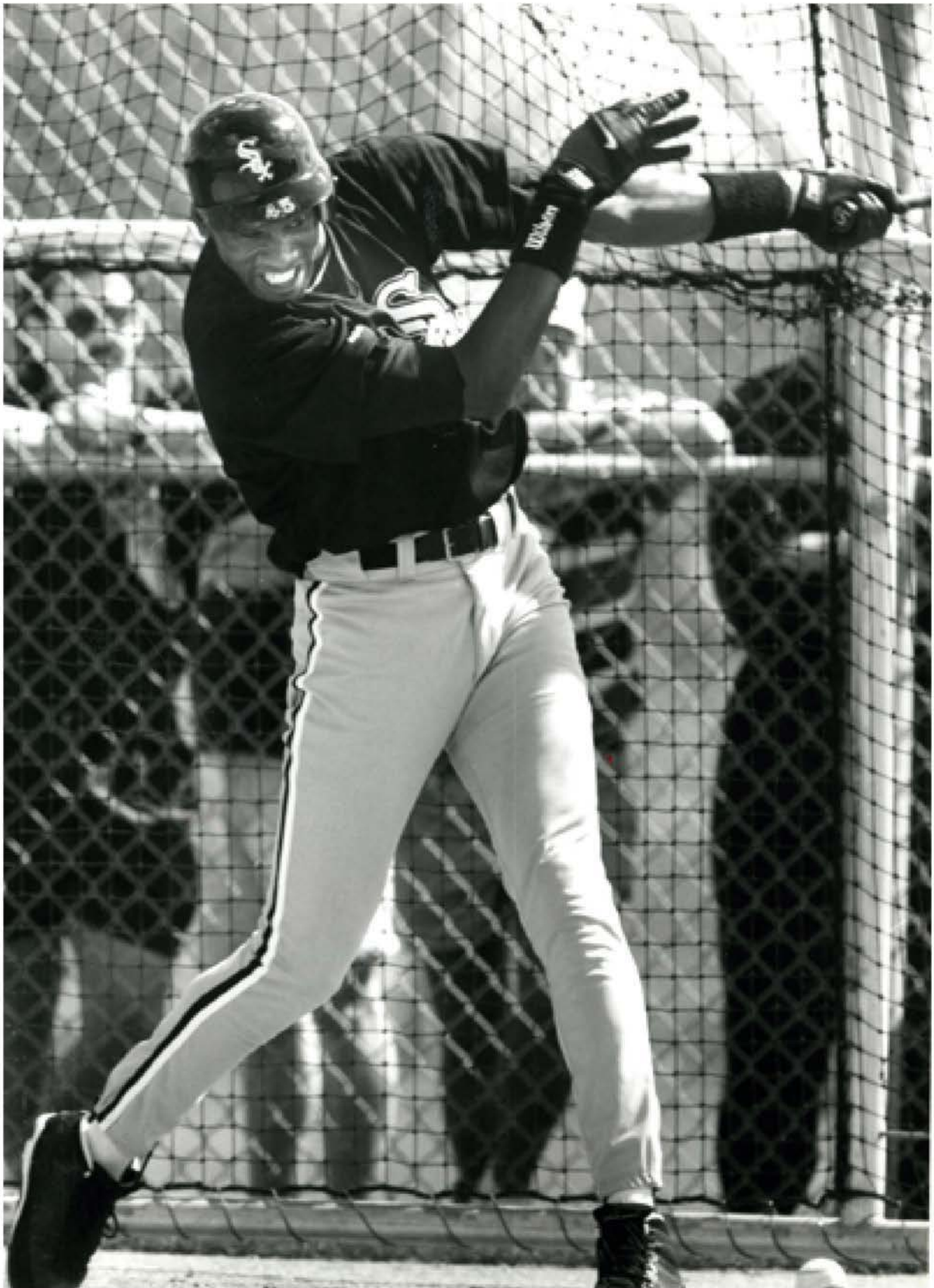
Check that. He still didn't realize what he had done an hour later. He didn't fully grasp that his name will forever be mentioned with O'Rourke and Flutie in BC lore.

"I guess I don't realize that," he admitted. "After Northwestern, it was drilled into me that one play doesn't make a game. I learned that lesson. The only reason I was able to make the kick was due to everything that went before. I did my job, but there were so many others who also did theirs."

Yeah, but the fact is that after 59 minutes and 55 seconds of astonishing football, nothing was decided until the rich kid kicked the football. David Gordon did what Richard Gordon usually does. He closed the deal.

"Are you going to ask for a scholarship now?" he was asked.

"I might," he said with a smile.



March 22, 1994

A minor adjustment for Jordan

SARASOTA, Fla. — What price would you give for the thoughts of the right fielder as he stood out there on Field 4, aka Nellie Fox Field?

He says he was thinking only technical baseball thoughts, but is that really possible? The right fielder was playing in his first minor league baseball exhibition game, representing the Prince William White Sox against the Frederick Orioles. No more than 200 yards to his left, he could hear the sounds at Ed Smith Stadium, where the defending American League West champion Chicago White Sox were playing the Boston Red Sox before a sold-out gathering, while he, the great Michael Jordan, was playing baseball on a field whose behind-the-plate bleachers might - might - have seated 200.

Oh, the indignity! Right?

“Well, it is a little different atmosphere,” conceded Jordan. “But it was peaceful out there. I deserved some peace after all I’ve gone through the past three weeks.”

And for the record, here is what Michael Jordan says he was thinking:

“I was just thinking about what to do if the ball was hit to me. That’s what I was focusing on. I was watching how the other guys were playing the hitters. I was trying to concentrate because there’s more activity behind me on this field. Someone is behind you running laps. Guys are walking by and saying, ‘Get a hit yet?’ “

That’s what he says, anyway. If he was actually thinking about missing the 1994 NBA playoffs or brooding about the Boston College victory over his beloved Tar Heels or the fact that he hasn’t been able to get out on the golf course lately, he’ll certainly never admit it. But c’mon, Michael. We know your mind has to drift every once in a while, especially when you consider that you are, after all, Michael Jeffrey Jordan, and you now are playing with and against kids 8 to 13 years younger. What lies ahead for you are more exhibition games on dusty fields, followed by the infamous bus rides leading to unimaginable scrutiny as you attempt to master a game whose twin essences are subtlety and muscle memory.

If this baseball experiment bothers some baseball purists (Sports Illustrated, get a grip!), and if there are millions of well-intentioned people who fear that Michael Jordan is somehow compromising his dignity by trying a new game on the professional level, then all I can say is that these people just don't understand Michael Jordan. Either you believe that he truly loves baseball and is totally sincere, or you don't.

I do.

"I know what I'm doing here," he said. "I never felt I was embarrassing myself. I knew when I jumped into this a lot of people didn't approve. I asked many people for their observations and opinions and they weren't all positive. I know there were a lot of critics, and I can't say they were all wrong.

"But I got into this because I love baseball and I wanted to understand it from the inside, and I'm doing that. If anything, my appreciation of baseball is much deeper."

He's out of the big-league loop for the present time. The White Sox took the long-awaited step of placing Jordan in the "designated for reassignment" category. For the next week he will play in exhibition games for whatever minor league outfit the organization sees fit. In a week or so, he will find out his next stop. He hopes it will be Double A Birmingham. He has said he won't tolerate anything less. And now?

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it," he declared.

Was the player on display yesterday a Double A ballplayer? Jordan went 1 for 4 with a walk. He dropped a fly ball by nonchalantly a little flare into short right. He saw a bullet go over his head for a double. He caught a routine fly. He broke up a double play with a semi-rolling-block maneuver he referred to as his "avoid-the-slide" ploy.

"If he's willing to ride the buses, I think he can become a player," said Frederick lefthander Scott Emerson, who gave up a Jordan RBI single through the first base hole in the first inning. "I don't think he was very confident up there."

Emerson said he had kidded with his friends for the last two months. “If Michael Jordan comes up against me, I’ll drill him in the ribs,” he had promised. When the big moment came, well, are you crazy?

“I couldn’t do that,” he explained. What Emerson, a change-speeds lefty out of the Tommy John school, did, however, was show Michael Jordan his best fastball.

“The first time up I figured I had to challenge him, even though I’m not a fastball pitcher,” Emerson explained. “I jammed him, but he’s strong, and he hit it. The next time I threw him my pitches — changeups — and I got him.”

The next Oriole pitcher, 18-year-old Jason Hackett, was in high school on Maryland’s Eastern Shore a year ago. Now he was facing Michael Jordan.

“I tried not to think of him being Michael Jordan,” Hackett said. “I was trying to throw strikes and make a good impression.”

Hackett was representative of the type of pitcher Jordan will be facing from now on. He’s been looking at big leaguers, or, at least, polished Triple A pitchers with an idea. Hackett is a kid with a great arm (228 K’s in 108 high school innings as a junior and senior) who has no idea where the ball is going. He had Jordan doing a little hip-hop in the batter’s box.

And while he wasn’t trying to drill Michael either, someone out there might be figuring that is a way to make a name. “Everybody’s waiting to see who’ll be the first guy to do it,” chuckles Jordan.

If it happens, Michael’s attitude is “so what?” He figures it’s all part of baseball, and that’s all he’s asking - to be part of baseball. Right now that means standing on Nellie Fox Field while Frank Thomas plays in Ed Smith Stadium. It means doing some fancy stepping against the Jason Hacketts of the world. It means paying serious dues in a grinding sport. It means having to ask some 20-year-old teammate for advice.

Some people say that’s degrading if you’re Michael Jordan. He says, hey, it’s my life, and I’m happy. Michael figures you really ought to have something a little more important to worry about.

August 21, 1995

After his fall, back to earth for McNeeley

LAS VEGAS — The official over/under for the Tyson-McNeeley fight was 2 1/2 rounds, but Boxing Illustrated editor-publisher Bert Randolph Sugar, who has been around the game long enough to have referred to Jack Dempsey as “Sonny,” kept saying all week that the real over/under was “somewhere between ‘Oh say can you see’ and ‘The dawn’s early light.’ “

Scorecard - Singer Johnny Gill’s tortured, self-indulgent, amateurish and tone-deaf anthem: 2 minutes 31 seconds; the fight: 1 minute 29 seconds.

Close enough.

The first order of business for Peter McNeeley & Co. now is to get their money. They didn’t get enough to start with, and now they must make sure they’ll get it. This is, after all, Don King we’re talking about.

Asked about this very subject the other day, Peter’s dad, Tom, said, nah, I’m not worried.

“Don King,” he said, “is an easy guy to find.”

Maybe so, but getting The Great Exaggerator’s signature on a paycheck is the real feat.

Question No. 2 is this: What will become of Peter McNeeley?

He’s had a Warholian few months. Consider that until his name was first floated as a possible opponent in Mike Tyson’s first post-imprisonment fisticuff encounter, only friends, family and the most dedicated local boxing aficionados even knew a heavyweight named Peter McNeeley existed. I say with all candor that I certainly didn’t.

You could take the sum total of all his pre-Tyson clippings from the local papers and the stack wouldn't reach to Spud Webb's ankle. No rational person could possibly say that, based on his record, he deserved a shot at Mike Tyson.

He turned out to be the perfect foil. McNeeley performed in public exactly as Don King wished. He didn't play the Mr. Humble role, far from it. He said he was going to KO Mike Tyson from Day One. He was the perpetual Mr. Macho Man, and there is no question he occasionally went too far. I mean, was it necessary to spit on a Tyson photo as he sat down for a radio interview last week?

While Tyson was shielded from view by managers Rory Holloway and John Horne, McNeeley went out to sell the fight. He mugged for any and all cameras, including David Letterman's. He went on radio. He spilled his guts to the printed press. No one in America can profess to being a sports fan and not know who Peter McNeeley is.

Had the fight ended in some, shall we say, "dignified" manner, McNeeley would clearly be a marketable commodity. Had he gotten in a few good licks and then gone down in the second round, had he answered the bell for the third round or had he simply taken, and shrugged off, a good Tyson shot or two, he'd be an honest hero today.

Of course, according to Don King, he already is. "Peter McNeeley came to fight," King proclaimed. "He was raining blows in all directions."

True enough. Peter McNeeley said he wasn't afraid of Mike Tyson and that he would carry the fight to him, and that's exactly what he did. McNeeley is a brawler. There is never a question of "strategy" in any McNeeley fight.

The issue was never really McNeeley's willingness to fight. The issue always was what would happen when McNeeley got hit by a typical Mike Tyson shot. As one member of the McNeeley camp put it last week, "My guy can pitch, but I don't know if he can catch."

That's where McNeeley's stiff-laden 36-1 record, replete with the 20 first-round dispatches, was not going to be of any assistance. He had never fought a quality foe,

so he had never been hit with a quality punch such as those a Mike Tyson — OK, such as the Mike Tyson — delivers.

Now, Peter McNeeley understands. He was down from a modest Tyson blow almost as soon as the fight began, and, as for the second knockdown . . .

“It was so quick,” he explained, “I didn’t even know the takes the Lord’s name in vain thing was an uppercut. I didn’t, I didn’t, I didn’t. He’s right on you. He’s strong as a freakin’ bull. But I never gave a thought of fighting him any other way. I gotta beat force with force.”

The paying customers, both here and in all the pay-per-view homes, would like to get their hands around trainer Vinny Vecchione’s throat because he’s the one who plunged the bout into chaos by jumping into the ring when McNeeley appeared to be in full possession of his faculties after the second knockdown, thereby transforming himself from media darling to all-around villain.

Well, guess what? This is boxing, folks. Rule No. 1 is that you never invest in boxing unless both of your eyes are very wide open. You must learn to accept whatever transpires, and, by the way, there are no refunds.

Peter McNeeley will be back, for sure, and it would be a good idea if he thinks about reinventing himself outside the ring. If he’s supposed to be a college guy, he should start acting like one. This WWF posturing worked well as part of the overall Tyson fight gag, but it came at the expense of his dignity. He’d better understand that most people were laughing at him, not with him.

There exists more than one report of McNeeley Boston-area summer bar sightings in which he was obnoxiously big-timing it, demanding special treatment by yelling, “I’m Peter McNeeley, and I’m fighting Mike Tyson!” That’s not funny. That’s pathetic.

It’s over, Peter. You fought Mike Tyson, you did it your way, and you lived, perhaps thanks to Vinny Vecchione, to tell the tale. Now, get over it. Do something with your life. Your task now is to make the Tyson fight a footnote, not the focal part, of your life.

June 7, 1998

McRae's tour of bases a tour de force

Some guys win 1-0 games with home runs. Some win 1-0 games with singles to center field. Brian McRae can now tell the grandchildren that he once won a 1-0 game by inducing a balk.

"You're going to win two or three games a year on weird things," he shrugged.

McRae beat Tim Wakefield on a day when the knuckleballer was otherwise unbeatable, or, at least, unhittable. The Mets managed one hit off him in eight innings. Thanks almost exclusively to McRae, the Mets got a sixth-inning run — in what New York manager Bobby Valentine labeled a "wonderful game" — without the necessity of a hit. All they needed were the legs and moxie of Hal's Kid, who walked, took second on a seldom-seen delayed steal, advanced to third on a John Olerud grounder, and then scored when he made a menacing move down the line and a concerned Wakefield was charged with a balk by home plate umpire Terry Craft.

It was aggressive baseball. It was smart baseball. It was connoisseur's baseball.

To Brian McRae, son of a major league baseball player, it was simple, common-sense baseball.

"The tone of the game, the way it was going," said McRae, "I thought the only way we were going to score a run was by trying to make something happen."

McRae led off the sixth inning of a scoreless game. In his first two at-bats, he had grounded to second and popped to short. "He was throwing more balls that inning," McRae recalled. The count went to 2-and-0 and 3-and-1 before McRae took ball four. It would be Wakefield's only walk of the afternoon, and the 29-year-old center fielder was determined to take advantage of it.

He remained on first as Wakefield fanned Bernard Gilkey for out number one. Now he started thinking about stealing second, but against Wakefield this is not an easy thing to do.

“I wasn’t going to get it done on a straight steal,” he said. “Wakefield is quick to the plate, and catcher Scott Hatteberg looks like he has a strong arm.”

No problem. McRae had a Plan B. Some 20 times in his career he has successfully executed a delayed steal. The time had come to try it again.

He decided to go on a 2-and-1 pitch to Olerud.

“I got lucky,” he explained. “The pitch was down in the dirt and Hatteberg probably couldn’t come right up with it.”

No one in a Red Sox uniform was expecting anything funky. McRae stole second without drawing a throw.

The Olerud grounder moved him to third. When he got there with two away, he immediately liked what he saw: Wakefield would be pitching from a full windup.

It was now back to Spring Training 101. Valentine is a firm believer in trying to disrupt any pitcher trying to pitch from a full windup with a man on third. Mets players are taught to make hard moves down the line, and one thing about McRae is that he’s good at following instructions.

McRae made a pretty good move toward home on the first pitch, a called strike to cleanup batter Butch Huskey. As Wakefield went into his motion on the next pitch, McRae made a serious move, one that would have done Jackie Robinson proud. Wakefield reacted. He broke his motion, and Craft immediately ruled a balk. McRae came trotting home with the run that would make Bobby Jones a winner over Wakefield.

McRae is a solid major league player, but he is no star. He is a .265 lifetime hitter. This is his third big-league team. If he ever thought he was heading for Cooperstown, he was forced to abandon those thoughts a long time ago.

In order to make himself useful, he has had to offer managers more than raw skills. He has had to learn the game. And the very fact that he has a game put a W in the Mets’ pocket yesterday afternoon.

Start with the delayed steal, which is not something you see every day, week, or month in the big leagues.

“I learned that in Rookie ball from Joe Jones, who is now the Pirates’ first base coach,” McRae explained. “He was my first manager in baseball. He taught me that there were many little things that can help you win baseball games.”

As for the hard move on third base against a pitcher in a windup, McRae gave the credit to his manager.

“Bobby likes us to be aggressive,” McRae said. “He says if you think you can steal home, don’t be afraid. Otherwise, you might get something out of it. The pitch could be in the dirt, the batter might get a better pitch to hit or, in this case, you might get a balk.”

But Valentine can’t go out and make it happen. Only the player can do that, and McRae was textbook yesterday.

“You’ve really got to sell it,” he acknowledged. “You can’t take a casual stroll.”

It all came under the heading of Doing What You Had To Do against a pitcher who wasn’t otherwise forthcoming.

“We didn’t have a whole lot of good at-bats against him,” said McRae. “He threw an awful lot of strikes. I bet if you asked him he’d say he had some of his best stuff this year.”

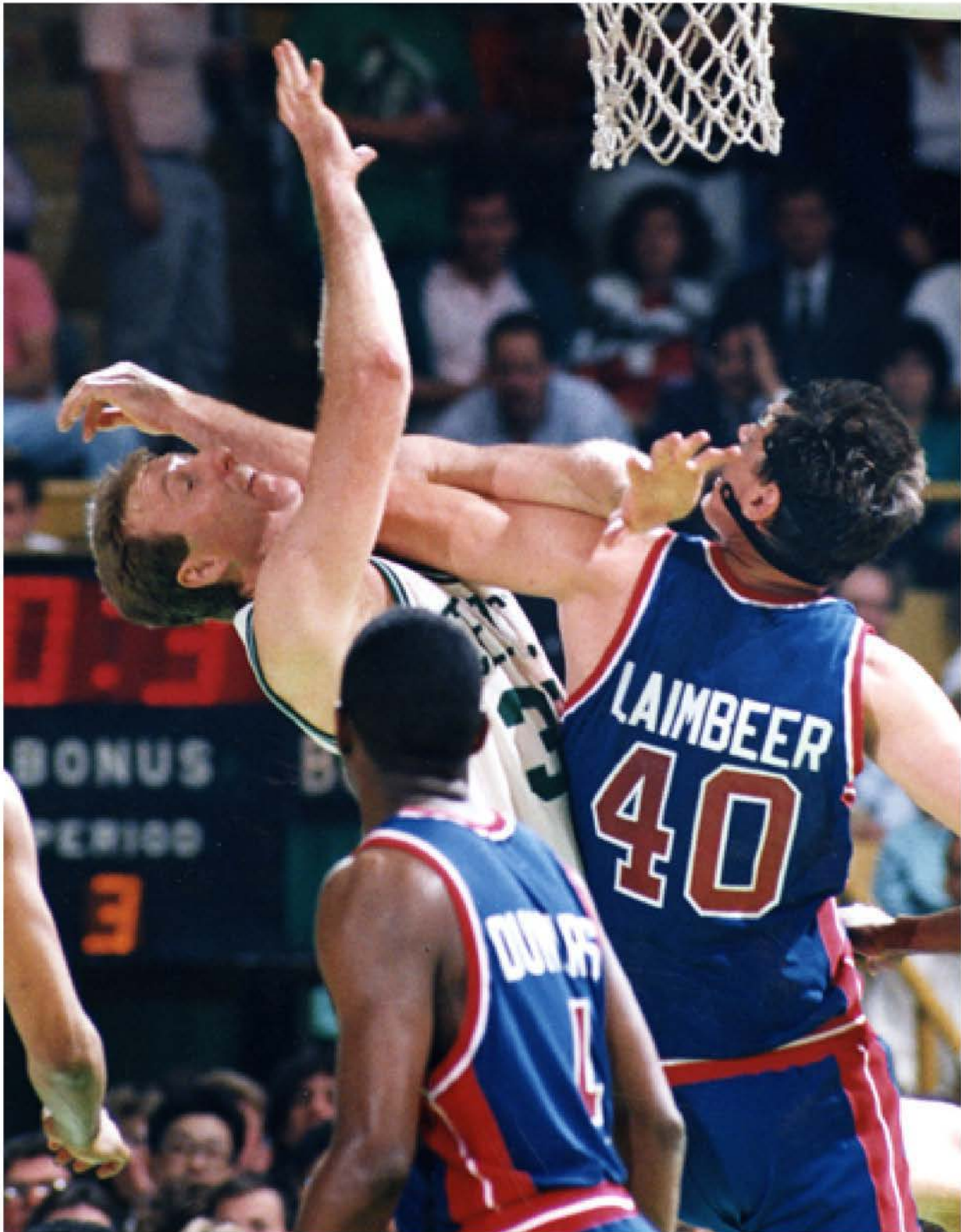
(Ed. note: I asked him. He said yes.)

This was all a great display of baseball playing, but to Brian McRae it was just a matter of being a professional.

“It’s all part of my game,” he said. “I work on it. You’ve got to know what your game is. You work on something, and it might win you one game a year.”

Let’s hope someone had enough gratitude to buy this man some dinner.

Issues



June 11, 1990

Once again, Laimbeer does all the dirty work

PORTLAND, Ore. — On a villainy scale of 1 to 10, with 1 representing a Christmastime Salvation Army bell ringer and 10 standing for a force of such surpassing international evil that Albania and the Vatican would seek to join forces in order to destroy it, this was Bill Laimbeer's perfect 10.

Portland coach Rick Adelman said it all by saying, well, nothing.

"What did you think of Bill Laimbeer today?" Adelman was asked.

First, a three-second pause. Then, a throat-clear.

"I have no comment on Bill Laimbeer," chirped the downtrodden Trail Blazers mentor.

Funny. When Detroit coach Chuck Daly was asked the same question, he started answering before the question was even asked in full.

"Ahhh," cooed Daly. "Unbelievable. He just controlled the game. What a great rebounding job. He got tough rebounds, fighting off four or five people. He was determined. Maybe only Billy can do that."

There are players who can match Bill Laimbeer's determination, but none who can duplicate his ability to disrupt opponents' concentration and infuriate crowds. And the fans of America are such well-meaning fools. When Laimbeer fouled out of yesterday's game with 3:15 remaining, they gave him the kind of serenade that is symphonic music to a villain's ears. They jeered and booed. Laimbeer acknowledged them with a let's-hear-it gesture and a mock bow as he walked to the bench.

With Dennis Rodman unable to play because of a severe ankle sprain, the Pistons responded by playing a game that oozed professionalism. Seven men crashed double figures during the satisfying 121-106 destruction of the Trail Blazers. Heroes abounded, from Joe Dumars to Isiah Thomas, to Vinnie Johnson to John Salley. But

based on Detroit's individual job requirements, no one came closer to playing a perfect game than Laimbeer.

The stat sheet says Laimbeer had 11 points and 12 rebounds. What it doesn't say is how many of his 11 defensive rebounds were in heavy traffic, nor does it state that on three occasions he stopped fast breaks. It also neglects to note that he induced an astonishing five offensive fouls, taking some legitimate charges and also pulling what Johnny Most would refer to as a Stanislavsky, or "phony flop," on both Kevin Duckworth and Buck Williams.

How badly did he antagonize the Blazers? Consider Buck Williams' final three personals. Nos. 4 and 5 were charges taken by Laimbeer. No. 6 came about when an angered and frustrated Williams elbowed Laimbeer while the re-heated Microwave was hitting a jumper.

"I wanted him to know I didn't appreciate the way he was playing," explained Williams. "But in the long run, I lost in that situation, because I picked up my sixth foul."

What absolutely, positively infuriates opponents is that not since Jerry Sloan hung 'em up has there been a man as adept at taking charges and drawing bogus fouls. If Dave Cowens ever played against this guy, the fight would start in the first minute.

"As a player you go into the game expecting he'll be flopping, because that's the kind of game he plays," says Williams. "But when he starts getting calls, that's when it gets frustrating. If Game 4 is going to be a flopping contest, I'm calling a friend of mine who's an actor and get some pointers."

An interested onlooker was former Hawks coach Mike Fratello, who is working the series for the SNN television network. "It's not a matter of preparing your players to play against Bill Laimbeer," he explains, "what you want is Bill Laimbeer on your team. Then you can allow your emotions to display that you really like what he does."

And if you're his coach, what's not to like? People can throw at their Bill Laimbeer dartboard all they want, but the man is out there for one purpose, and

that's to win the game. He accomplishes this by hard rebounding, intelligent position defense (which includes putting so much body on people off the ball that they eventually start looking for help, whether from teammates or officials), outside shooting, solid pick-setting, and the kind of ceaseless hustle that embarrasses teammates into playing harder.

A typical Laimbeer sequence: With 5.6 seconds remaining in the half, he hit a left-corner jumper. With 1.7 seconds left, he took a charge at the other end from Clyde Drexler.

With Rodman out, roles had to be adjusted. You can be sure nobody had to tell Laimbeer what would be expected of him.

"My job is doing the dirty work," said the impish Laimbeer, whose postgame inquisition attire was a towel and a — what else? — black fedora borrowed from mini-villain Mark Aguirre. "With Dennis out, the rebounding responsibility falls on me, the defensive rotation responsibility falls on me, and that's what I do best — the dirty work."

Some big men get it done defensively by blocking, altering or discouraging shots. Since Laimbeer can't jump over a menu, he does it by sniffing out plays and getting to Point A before an opponent does. Then he stands straight up, raises his arms and hopes for a friendly toot. And if the opponent gestures ever so slightly with an arm or elbow, Laimbeer acts as if he's been hit with a 2 by 4.

Yesterday's game continually gravitated to Bill Laimbeer. "He very definitely seemed to be everywhere," admitted Portland's Terry Porter. "He took at least four charges that I know of, and when guys drove to the basket, he seemed to be there. We felt we drew contact, but no foul was called."

But for every Stanislavsky, there are 10 extraneous elbows to his face by angry foes. "Bill was getting pounded off the ball," said Detroit assistant coach Brendan Malone, "and he just kept on playing. He took a lot of abuse out there."

And the more the opponents whine about the flops, and the more the fans scream, boo and invoke sorcerers' curses, Bill Laimbeer just laughs and waves his championship ring.

March 16, 1993

A well-traveled movie fan presents ‘The Layman’s Guide to the Oscars’

Here’s what the critics say:

“Unforgiven” is the favorite for Best Picture.

Al Pacino is the man to beat for Best Actor.

Susan Sarandon is the logical choice for Best Actress.

Here’s what I say:

“Unforgiven” was an enjoyable movie, but somewhat overrated. I mean, “Shane” or “High Noon” it ain’t.

Al Pacino has done better work, and I got tired of the character after the eighth or ninth “Hoo-Ha!”

Susan Sarandon was fine, but the role was a One Note Samba.

OK, I never went to film class. I’ve never met a director. I’ve never even been introduced to a Best Boy.

I’m just a film fan who happened to attend 65 movies last year, which translates into a mountain of Reese’s Peanut Butter Cups. I’ve already seen 20 this year, and I can claim a distinction not many members of the Motion Picture Academy of Arts and Sciences can match. Without anyone mailing cassettes to my home, I have seen each one of this year’s 30 primary nominations. Best Actor, Best Actress, Best Supporting Actor, Best supporting Actress, Best Director and Best Picture — I’ve seen them all.

Last year, I saw movies in 33 theaters covering seven states. I saw movies in a theater so crowded my wife and I had to split up in order to find a seat. I saw many a movie in theaters so empty I thought five minutes or so before the scheduled start I

would fulfill a dream and have a private showing (Elaine Ryan has had this experience). I haven't had a solo showing yet, but I'm sure I will someday.

I didn't see everything I wanted to see. I missed "A Midnight Clear," and Elaine Ryan says it was probably the best movie of the year. I missed "Leap of Faith," and as a Steve Martin freak, that hurts.

Incidentally, the Ryans seldom rent. Wayne Huzienga doesn't get rich off me. I believe movies should be seen in theaters, with the exception of "Casablanca" and "Diner," which can be seen biannually in the comfort of the living room.

You're wondering, "How does he do this?" Number one, the kids are 22 and 17. If we want to go to the movies, we go to the movies. Number two, I can often shake free for matinees. Number three, I travel. Number four, I really work at it. I like going out. It makes me feel alive. I subscribe to Premiere Magazine. I scour reviews. Movies matter to me. I always stay for the entire credits, if only to satisfy a theory that four out of five movie credits contain at least one nickname (e.g. "Asst. Gaffer, John 'Tiny' Jefferson).

The critics will all have their say, but, with all due respect, most of them are writing for each other and are pining for another Bergman. Scorsese, I understand. Rob Reiner, I understand. Merchant and Ivory, I understand. The only Bergman I can deal with has a resume that says "Good field, OK Hit," and he's spent the last decade playing first base for the Detroit Tigers. The West Newton and Coolidge Corner Cinemas are as avant-garde as I get (When you get a minute, explain "Cabeza de Vaca" to me.)

Here, therefore, is The Layman's Guide to the Oscars:

Best Actor

Clint Eastwood ("Unforgiven")? No, no, no. Stephen Rea was terrific in "The Crying Game," and certainly merits a nomination. Pacino's in line for a Lifetime Achievement Award, a la Paul Newman in "The Color of Money," and the Smart Guys say he'll win it. He shouldn't. Denzel Washington was easily better in the horribly neglected "Malcolm X," but he only gets the silver medal in this race.

If anyone actually saw all five nominees, they'd know this is open and shut. Nobody out-acted Robert Downey Jr. in "Chaplin." Nobody. He had to do a British accent. He had to do physical comedy. He had to play a man who aged from his late teens to his 70s, and he carried it all off. His old Chaplin is sensational, because he gets a believable voice down and doesn't over-act. I know he won't win, but I'm telling you it will be a robbery of Brinksian proportions.

Two other actors worth nominations were Ned Beatty for "Hear My Song," (or was that a Best Supporting?) It's often not easy to tell, and Tim Robbins for "Bob Roberts," in which he was appropriately creepy and totally believable as the songwriting, right-wing candidate.

Best Actress

Catherine Deneuve is there for "Indochine" only because it's such a weak year for lead female roles they had to come up with somebody to fill out the card. There is surely nothing wrong with Mary McDonnell's performance in "Passion Fish," although it isn't any better than Alfre Woodard's in the same movie.

Now, then. I'm a Susan Sarandon fan, and she surely is compelling as the anguished mother hen in "Lorenzo's Oil," but her emotions in this movie run the gamut, as Dorothy Parker said of Kate Hepburn, "From A to B." Fierce and Determined she starts out, and Fierce and Determined she finishes.

Give me Emma Thompson in "Howards End," without doubt, but, most of all, give me Michelle Pfeiffer in "Love Field." She portrays a woman of great complexity. Frankly, I don't think this is a difficult choice.

Incidentally, I would have thrown out Deneuve and inserted Diane Lane for "My New Gun."

Best Supporting Actor

What a powerhouse category! The chalk says Gene Hackman wins for "Unforgiven," and he was indeed a cinematic force. Pacino's here for "Glengarry Glen Ross," and he's more deserving in this race than he is over in Best Actor. David Paymer ("Mr. Saturday Night") is in over his head. As for Jaye Davidson ("The Crying Game"), supply your own punch line.

The truth is that the most electrifying 10 (eight? six?) minutes of acting on display last year were supplied by Alec Baldwin in "Glengarry Glen Ross." But 10 or eight or six minutes is 10 or eight or six minutes, and, yes, I know that once upon a time Beatrice Straight got Best Supporting Actress for one scene in "Network." Anyway, Jack Nicholson deserves to win for his high-voltage (but not completely over-the-top) portrayal of Col. Nathan Jessup in "A Few Good Men."

This is easily the toughest category, because Robert DeNiro ("Mistress"), Al Freeman (an etherial Elijah Muhammad in "Malcolm X"), Matt Dillon ("Singles"), David Straitharn ("Passion Fish"), Jack Lemmon ("Glengarry Glen Ross"), Xavier McDaniel ("Singles" - Ha! Just wanted to see if you're paying attention), Forrest Whitaker ("The Crying Game") "Fred Gwynne ("My Cousin Vinnie"), Jon Lovitz ("A League Of Their Own"), Kevin Bacon ("A Few Good Men") and, of course, Baldwin ("Glengarry Glen Ross") are all worthy nominees.

Best Supporting Actress

I love 'em all. Judy Davis is always scintillating — she should have walked away with something last year for "Barton Fink" and "Impromptu" — and she is up to form in "Husbands and Wives." You can't knock either Vanessa Redgrave or Joan Plowright in "Howards End," although the Redgrave character was so sweet and virtuous I wanted to give her one good slap. Miranda Richardson ("Damage") should be acclaimed as Actress of The Year for her additional work in "Howards End" and "The Crying Game.

When I saw "My Cousin Vinnie," I flipped over Marisa Tomei as the enchanting Mona Lisa Whatever, but figured Tomei was just doing a what-comes-natural New York turn. It wasn't until I saw "Untamed Heart" that I realized how good an actress Tomei is, and that she really was acting in "My Cousin Vinnie" and not just playing herself. She's the best in this field, and yet the Smart Guys say she has no chance.

Here's a tough omission: Robin Wright in "The Playboys."

Best Director

We're talking sore spot with me, because I loved "Malcolm X," and thought it was an astonishingly quick 3 hours and 16 minutes. But the establishment just won't make peace with Spike Lee.

Martin Brest ("Scent of A Woman") is a joke. I'm not going to knock Clint Eastwood, and it's impossible to detract from James Ivory's achievement in "Howards End." That leaves the estimable Robert Altman for "The Player," and Neil Jordan for "The Crying Game." I'm rooting for Altman, well, just because. But I think Jordan probably deserves it for his truly original tour de force.

But whoever does win it should apologize to Spike.

Best Picture

"The Player" should be here. What's more important is that "Scent Of A Woman" shouldn't be. C'mon, take out the tango scene, and what have we got? "Unforgiven" is all right, but Best Picture? Uh-uh. It's just time to honor Clint; that's all.

"A Few Good Men" is entertaining, and both Nicholson and Bacon are tremendous, but Best Picture? Sorry.

A vote for "Howards End" would be a vote for civility, and that's certainly worthwhile, but the best picture of these five is "The Crying Game."

Regardless, the fact remains that the best reason to leave the house and go see a movie last year was "Malcolm X." Then again, what do I know? I'm just a sportswriter. You know, Oscar Madison.

June 18, 1994

Following Simpson saga from afar

NEW YORK — I came to see a game.

How could I watch a game?

I never left the press room, and I wasn't alone. In 26 years of covering sports, I may never have spent a weirder night. The only thing that was close was the night we heard that Scud missiles were flying around the Middle East. But as real as that was, the whole thing seemed like some sort of abstract. This time it wasn't the Middle East, where most of us have never been. It was California, and the central figure was O.J. Simpson.

How could I leave the press room to see the Knicks play the Rockets when CNN was showing me, live and in color, “Thelma and Louise Meets Dog Day Afternoon, And Featuring O.J. Simpson”? I mean, that was O.J. Simpson in that Ford Bronco, and that wasn’t a scene out of “Speed” or anything else on that TV screen. That was real life. That was O.J. Simpson who was sitting inside that Bronco with some sort of weapon held to his head as the vehicle proceeded from I-5 to California 91 to I-405 with a legion of police cars in pursuit and people lining the highways and byways of Southern California shouting words of encouragement for the Juice.

The double doors from the Madison Square Garden press room leading to the arena floor not 75 feet away were open for most of the second half, and we who remained inside could hear the cheering outside. We could hear the Garden organ pounding out that dreaded “Let’s-play-defense” cadence, and we knew that inside more than 18,000 people were a lot more concerned with the Knicks finding a way to take a 3-2 series lead over the Rockets than they were about what was going on with O.J. Simpson. After the game, there would be plenty of time for them to worry about the Juice.

But if you started off watching that police caravan trailing Al Cowlings’ Ford Bronco when it was discovered down there in Orange County, you could not develop a Pat Riley-type focus on the basketball game. I mean, that was the Juice in that Bronco. That was the Juice who had asked that a note in which he sounded suicidal be read to the public by a friend. That was the Juice who had written that “I can’t go on . . . No matter what the outcome, people will always point.” That was a crazed, despondent and desperate O.J. Simpson.

Once O.J. Simpson had his Garden moments. For him, they were outdoor days of glory, but no matter. He had been given a special athletic gift, and he had developed it to the fullest. He ran his way to a Heisman Trophy. He ran for 2,000 yards. He marched into the Hall of Fame. Whatever glories Hakeem Olajuwon or Patrick Ewing might know, the Juice knew. And now he was said to be sitting in the passenger seat of an old teammate’s Ford Bronco with a gun to his head, a double murder 1 rap hanging over his head?

I had to see this through. I helped create the Juice, and so did you. We take our athletic heroes and we elevate them to unreasonable heights, on and off the floor,

and we demand they stay there. We often have a difficult time grasping how frail and flawed they can be when the game and the cheering both stop. The Juice swore he was innocent, but rather than stay and fight the charge, he had come to the conclusion he would never have a life left. Joe Average could have a life. Even a cleared Juice could not. His life would be forever scrutinized. Or so he thought.

There has never been such a scene involving anyone with the remote stature of O.J. Simpson as that shot of the Ford Bronco proceeding along those California highways with all those police cars trailing behind. All night long, reporters charged with the duty of reporting what I am now told was a pretty good basketball game would come into the press room for a look at the O.J. coverage. How could they not?

They came streaming in by the scores at halftime, attaching themselves to the TV sets, playing journalistic catch-up on one of the Stories of the Century (well, isn't it?). But duty called within 15 minutes, and back they went to the basketball game. Sort of.

For long stretches of the evening, the television monitors provided for the press folk watching the game inside the arena were tuned not to NBC but to CNN, or whatever outlet could provide the almost-impossible-to-believe O.J. Simpson saga.

As the second half unfolded, I could hear Marv Albert's voice reverberating throughout the press room. I heard something about a Knick 13-point lead, and then I heard the Rockets were up by 3, and then I heard the boomp-boomp-boomp-boomp of the Garden organ and the shrieks of "De-Fense!" from the devoted Knick crowd while I was staring at the Bronco parked in the driveway and wondering if we were about to see something unspeakably gruesome unfold. Thank God we did not.

If this had been some guy named Oliver John Simpson who had commandeered his buddy to drive him along the California freeways while he pointed a gun at his own head, there would have been no crowd in the press room. There might have been some people paying attention along the route, but very few. Hey, California is California, after all.

But this was Orenthal James Simpson, The One And Only Juice. It isn't supposed to come to this when you're the Juice.

Anyway, I knew there'd be another game. There always is. Every once in a while, Real Life comes first.

November 9, 1997

BU, in home finale, shows where heart is

Happy, now, Mr. Chancellor?

You finally got it done. It took you 25 years, but you got even with football. You weren't big enough to take on Darrell Royal at Texas, but you finally got what you wanted at Boston University. You're now on an equal footing with the Sorbonne. Perhaps you can ring up the folks in Paris for a Saturday afternoon chess match next year.

Jon Westling is supposed to be the president of the school. Isn't that right, Mr. Chancellor? In this case a title means nothing. You, John Silber, still rule, and it was your Killer Kowalski-like hold that brought an end to 91 years of BU football. But unlike one of The Killer's hapless foes, the BU kids you have callously abandoned never capitulated. These "little boys," as you so condescendingly referred to them, made an eloquent statement in the wind and rain yesterday afternoon.

They brought an end to BU football — at home, anyway — in complete and utter glory, stomping the University of Massachusetts by a 33-8 score for their first win of the season. It was, Mr. Chancellor, one of those performances that dignifies all athletic competition. What these kids did for themselves, their coaches, their families, their friends, all former BU football players and loyal BU followers everywhere was elevate sport into something noble and decent. It is what organized sport is ultimately all about. Too bad you weren't there to see it. You might — and I know how incomprehensible it is for you to even imagine this — have learned something.

"I don't know whether to laugh or cry, or what," said quarterback Dan Hanafin, who made his six completions good for 148 yards and one touchdown. "I'm excited we won a game in this situation, but at the same time there is that cloud hanging over

us and it's tough to enjoy a great win like this when you know there won't be any more great wins."

You see, Mr. Chancellor, your BU kids expunged most of the bad stuff from their system last week down in Storrs, Conn. They wore the much-discussed generic white uniforms and they played an atrocious game. You were probably smirking. But yesterday UMass was confronted with a group that might very possibly have been the most emotional team in America.

Yesterday, your team wore their standard red and white home uniforms. What they did not do was play their standard 1997 game. They played sound, intelligent, impassioned football. It was a beautiful thing. It might not have been a Shakespearean sonnet or a Grecian urn, but it was a beautiful thing nevertheless.

"We talked all week about going out with pride and class," said co-captain Travis Raitt. "We played this game for 91 years at BU, and this was going to be our final game at Nickerson Field. This is the way we wanted to go out."

What irks everyone, Mr. Chancellor, is the way things were done. BU football loses money. Lots and lots of money. No one denies that. Some people won't look at the situation rationally, but most people understand the difficult business aspect of playing 1-AA football. But, Mr. Chancellor, you always seem to forget that you're dealing with people.

"BU had a right to do what it did," agrees Bob Rock, whose freshman son, Steve, is a starting cornerback. "If there is no student and alumni support, it should be the school's prerogative to drop the sport. But I came up here today from Fort Lauderdale because of the cowardly way the situation was handled. The manner in which they did this was classless."

Someone lied to coach Tom Masella when he took this job, Mr. Chancellor. Someone lied to the players. And what sense does it make to make an announcement of this nature before the season is over? What purpose does that serve?

And why is it necessary to eliminate football entirely? "I would like to propose that we join the Colonial League," says Tom Flanders, an SAE fraternity brother of Harry Agganis who has been faithfully attending BU football games for more than

45 years. "If scholarships are the problem, then let's do it. Drop down. But let's not dump football."

He doesn't get it, does he, Mr. Chancellor? He's just one of those Great Unwashed, one of those pathetic people who think there is merit in sport. He thinks that football has enhanced autumn Saturdays at his alma mater. He kind of figures that if it's not too undignified for MIT, Tufts, Williams, Amherst, and Stanford to play football, then it should be all right for Boston University, a k a Oxford West.

Don't lie to me, Mr. Chancellor. How you would have loved to make BU into a University of Chicago, with no big-time sports whatsoever. Too bad that damnable Jack Parker kept winning all those hockey games. You could have gone after his program, too.

But you got the one you really wanted, didn't you? You took care of Football, The Big Magilla, the one with the archetypical dumb jocks you so despised back when you couldn't get your way in Austin, Texas.

Too bad you will never live long enough to know the type of exhilaration your team felt yesterday. There is all kind of joy in this world, but there is one peculiar to athletics. These BU kids now know what it feels like to have everything they hold dear taken away, to then band together for a week of us-against-the-world practice and finally to play a game like yesterday's, a game that was strictly art for art's sake. They feel good about themselves today in a way arrogant intellectual snobs such as yourself will never experience.

So in that regard, anyway, Mr. Chancellor, I know I speak for the Boston University football players when I say, "Thanks." You may have given them the best day of their young lives.

December 19, 1997

SI shot of Belz blew his cover in the art world

One day you're a respected academician, an art historian, and director of the Rose Art Museum on the campus of Brandeis University.

Then the Dec. 8 issue of Sports Illustrated hits the stands and there you are on the cover, revealed for all the world to have had a previous incarnation as a pasty-faced generic White Guy in a basketball uniform.

What do you have to say for yourself, Carl Belz?

"When I saw that cover that day, I really couldn't process it," says Belz.

Oh, it was him, all right. What we saw was four-fifths of the 1956-57 Princeton starting five. There was no identification anywhere in the magazine, but let the record show that the quartet of Very White Guys consisted of Dave (Whitey) Fulcomer, Ken MacKenzie, Belz, and Don Davidson. Cropped out of the photo was Fred Perkins.

The title of the cover story was "What Ever Happened To The White Athlete?" and it just so happened that this photo of alabaster-hued basketball players seemed to the SI editors a perfect representation of a Caucasian-dominated athletic world that no longer exists.

"I've gotten some calls from friends of mine," says Belz. "They say, 'Oh, you had this other life?' The art world and the sports world don't have much crossover."

So for the benefit of the art set, let me explain to you who that second guy from the right on the infamous SI cover was.

Carl Belz was a very good basketball player. He was a 6-foot-5-inch guy with strong inside scoring moves and a knack for rebounding. He was a two-time All-Ivy League player who averaged 17 points a game for his career. On Jan. 31, 1959, he grabbed 29 rebounds against Rutgers to establish a one-game record that is likely to remain the Princeton standard well past the millennium.

Dave Gavitt, Dartmouth '59, remembers Belz very well.

“He was a gangling lefthander,” says Gavitt. “Sinewy. He could jump over you inside and he was very clever in the lane. Given the lefthand factor, you could call him a poor man’s Billy Cunningham.”

He was the son of a Haddon Heights (N.J.) meat company salesman. His father would sometimes take Carl and his twin brother, Herman, on his route. One of the Belz clients was Princeton University. Carl Belz fell in love with the Gothic campus and the entire Princeton aura, and when the time came for this basketball/baseball star to be recruited, he found it relatively easy to say thanks but no thanks to the likes of Dartmouth and Brown because he had always had his heart set on going to Princeton.

Once he got there, he discovered that Haddon Heights High School — no offense — was a long way from Andover, Exeter, and Lawrenceville. He was now in the academic big leagues.

“I had been co-valedictorian in high school,” he explains, “but this was a new level of intellectual challenge. It was intimidating in some sense. These guys had actually read books that hadn’t been assigned, and they had read them all the way through! It was an introduction to a culture.”

He entered school as a premed major. His epiphany came when he was looking around for a classic “gut” offering and someone suggested this particular drawing course.

And that is how Carl Belz, jock, eventually became Carl Belz, art historian.

The drawing course intrigued him. He became interested in art history. Before long, he was saying goodbye to medicine. He decided to make a career of art.

He graduated in 1959 and enrolled in a Ph.D program in art. After one year of pure academia, he realized he still had an itch that needed scratching. Basketball was not yet out of his system.

He had been drafted by the Philadelphia Warriors and he even talked to owner-coach Eddie Gottlieb, but he had no real interest in the NBA. “At that time, you didn’t play professional basketball in the hopes of making money,” he points out.

But after a year of postgraduate work, he once again wanted to play basketball. “I wanted to find out if I was perhaps a little better than an average Ivy League player,” he explains. The obvious way to find out was to play in the Eastern Basketball League, the forerunner of the Continental Basketball Association. The NBA was then an eight-team league. There were only 80 jobs available. The rest of the world didn’t count. The Eastern League was loaded with terrific basketball players, many of whom were blacks unfairly excluded from the NBA by the unofficial racial quotas of the day. The EBL was without question the second-best basketball league in the world.

Originally signed by the Wilkes-Barre Barons, Belz was traded to the Scranton Miners. His coach was Togo Palazzi. You want to talk about a Ph.D program . . .

“I used to drive to the games the league operated strictly on weekends with Larry Hennessey, a former Villanova All-American,” Belz says. “We’d talk basketball all the way up. I learned more basketball that year than in the rest of my career put together.”

Playing in 27 of the team’s 28 games, the Ivy Leaguer with the Ph.D in art temporarily on hold averaged 14 points and 9 rebounds. For his troubles, he got \$ 50 a game — “you rushed home to cash the check immediately” — and irreplaceable memories. “It was a totally different world for me,” he says. “Those guys were bona fide first-rate ballplayers.”

Having proven his point to himself, he retired from professional basketball. He got his Ph.D in 1963 and embarked on an academic career that took him to the University of Massachusetts, Mills College (in Oakland, Calif.), and then, in 1969, to Brandeis, where he taught art history for five years before becoming director at the Rose in 1974.

Brandeis athletic people such as Nick Rodis, Norm Levine, and Jeff Cohen knew who Carl Belz was, but the typical academic at Brandeis doesn't know from hook shots, and thus, most people were surprised to see him pop up on the SI cover.

Which is not to say they are necessarily impressed. He learned about academic snobbery at Princeton nearly 40 years ago. "Princeton had a social caste system," he recalls. "At the time, there were people who did feel I was a little sweaty."

And what about the possibility of going to one's grave known as that White Guy on the cover of SI?

"What can I say?" he inquires. "I don't resent it. We made our contribution at the time. If other athletes are around now who are better and who are black, it doesn't matter to me as long as the sport thrives."

So speaks Carl Belz, now and forever a pasty-faced White Guy who could play a little basketball in his day.

January 17, 2007

We're talking legends here

Ted Williams put down his paper and placed his reading glasses on the table.

"That kid will be up here someday, won't he?" inquired The Thumper.

"What kid?" replied Bill Russell.

"Brady. The football guy. Never had a football guy up here, but this kid's comin'. He was way off his game the other day in San Diego — my hometown, by the way — but when they needed the big throw, he came through. Gotta love those kind of guys."

It is morning coffee and schmooze time at Olympus Heights, the spectacular retirement community for the greatest of Boston's greats. No condos for these guys. We're talking major mansions. Bel Air stuff.

“Football, huh?” said Russell. “Isn’t that something? I gotta tell ya, I never honestly thought one of those football guys would ever get up here. I mean, for a long time the best player the Patriots had was that Hoggy guy, the one with the big thighs. They had to be the only team in the NFL whose all-time player was one of those big ol’ linemen. But I was talking to Jim Brown the other day, and he says this kid is like Otto Graham. He just wins the damn game.”

“Your buddy Jim Brown,” piped up Bobby Orr. “God, he could run, but Brady’s lucky he’s not playing with him. He’d get killed waiting for Brown to pick up a blitz.”

“Aw, Bobby, there you go again,” said Larry Bird. “That blitz thing. It just so happens hardly anybody blitzed when Jim Brown played. Yeah, the Giants did, but that’s about all.”

“Excuuuuuse me,” said Orr. “Larry Bird. Mr. Pigskin. Next thing you’ll be pontificating about David Beckham going to the Galaxy.”

“People always underestimate me,” Bird decided.

“You realize most of my time in Boston we never had a team,” pointed out Williams. “There was something going on during the war ...”

“None of those WWII stories or Korea stories or John Glenn stories today,” cackled Russell. “Not today. Can’t handle it.”

“All right, all right,” boomed The Thumper, “but I wasn’t going there. But if you want to hear about fishing in the Miramichi ...”

“Ted!” shouted Russell, grinning.

“Good fishin’ stories are all right with me,” said Bird.

“Me, too,” said the ever agreeable Orr.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” said Williams. “G’wan, Larry, tell us again about how you used to look up at Bobby’s number 4 during the anthem. I hear that one again, I think I’ll puke.”

“The point I was making was that when I played in Boston, there was zero competition from football. I had great timing. I left, and then the Patriots came. No point in them coming while I was still around.”

“I went down to see ‘em at Fenway every once in a while,” said Russell. “Remember that great year Jim Nance had in ‘66? He was our Jim Brown. Real nice guy. Died way too soon.”

“I was all over those ‘85 Pats,” said Bird. “You know who people forget? Craig James. Couldna won it without him. The town was really into it during January when they won those three road games. Then they got croaked and everybody went back to see us. And we were the best team ever, of course.”

“Really?” said Orr. “Then how come the Bulls won 72 one year and you guys couldn’t? What did you win that year? 65? 66?”

“67,” Bird declared. “And the only reason we didn’t win 70 was that it never occurred to us. If we’d started out tryin’ for 70, we’d have won 70.”

“OK,” said Russell. “So we know Brady’s coming here someday. You realize, of course, that he is from Northern California, where all the great ones are born and bred. By the way, Larry, my McClymonds High team would have beaten you hicks by 40. And I’d have shut you out!”

“I’d like to meet the guy,” said Orr. “Sixth-round pick. I wonder what that’s like? I was 12 when the Bruins signed me up, you know.”

“#*&\$#@*\$#!” thundered Williams. “Do I have to hear that one again?”

“I’ve been watching him since Bledsoe got nailed and Belichick put him in the lineup,” said Bird. “I found out I was looking at guys differently when I became an exec. Never heard one bad word about him. Team guy, all the way. By the way,

Bledsoe, how sad is that guy? Remember when people were suggesting he'd be up here someday?"

"He had a lotta yards early," said Russell.

"But statues in the Common have more mobility," Williams added.

"What do you think about this week, Russ?" inquired Williams. "Manning and Brady. Pretty good stuff. I even heard someone say it was a football answer to you and Wilt."

"Not the same," grunted Russell. "I guarded him. He guarded me. Brady runs his offense and Manning runs his. I'm a little worried this week. Game's in that damn dome. Oughta blow those places up."

"You're probably right," said Williams. "Although I mighta had a chuckle blasting 'em off the Hefty bags in Minny. Have I ever mentioned that I hit .366 and knocked in 142 in Minny back in '38?"

"I heard about that place," sneered Bird. "What was it? 250 down the line in right?"

"The guy's amazing," said Orr. "He's good, he's clutch, and he always says the right thing. And he doesn't hide away in his apartment, either. You know what I'm talking about, Larry. People didn't see you outside that house in Newton for years. But this guy goes wherever he damn well pleases. Nothing fazes him."

"But why exactly are we talking about this?" said Bird. "What is he? 29? He may be coming up here, but it's not like he's gonna be spendin' Fourth of July with us. He's got a few more titles to win."

"I was just pointing out that there can no longer be any doubt this guy gets the next plot up here," Williams. "You know me. I like to stay ahead of the curve."

January 22, 2009

NBA leads this race

This just in: The president of the United States is a man of color.

What? You knew this already? That's good. So does this mean we are all now post-racial?

Of course, we're not yet quite post-racial, and we may never become an ideally colorblind society, but if we truly want to get there, we do have a working institutional model.

Professional football (1946) and baseball (1947) integrated in the competition area first, and hockey doesn't really enter into this discussion, for rather obvious reasons, but the fact is the National Basketball Association is the most egalitarian major institution in our society. In fact, the NBA is so infused with black power that it is the only significant American institution I know of where the white man is inherently perceived to be inadequate to the task.

But put the topic of playing ability to the side for a moment. Where the NBA laps and relaps the field is in the area of authority. All this discussion about the paucity of black coaches and managers in football and baseball is so much Sanskrit to those of us who follow the NBA, where black coaches have been coming and going and coming and going and coming and going for 40-plus years.

Unless there's been a change in the last five minutes (you'd be wise to check), the NBA has nine black head coaches. Two of them replaced fired black head coaches, something that has been going on in this league since the Detroit Pistons fired Earl Lloyd and replaced him with assistant Ray Scott in 1972, when Barack Obama was 11 years old and living in Honolulu.

Entering the 2008-09 season, there had been 75 black coaching appointments in the history of the league covering 47 individuals. The list includes familiar names such as Lenny Wilkens (the all-time winningest NBA coach), Al Attles, K.C. Jones, Nate McMillan, Doc Rivers, Bernie Bickerstaff, Mo Cheeks, and, of course, Bill Russell, the man who started it all when he took over the Celtics in 1966.

It also includes such names as Gene Littles, Darrell Walker, Sidney Lowe, Butch Carter, Leonard Hamilton, and Randy Ayers. In other words, men whose names aren't quite so recognizable to the casual NBA fan.

And that's without mentioning the previous interim coaches. I've counted 12 of them, ranging in fame from Magic Johnson to Draff Young.

Black coaches are such a matter-of-fact way of life in the NBA that the Lakers and Heat are the only teams that have not yet hired one, although each has had a black interim mentor. Black coaches are so entrenched in the NBA that this spring we will celebrate the 34th anniversary of the first all-black coaching matchup in the NBA Finals (Golden State's Attles vs. Washington's Jones).

Look, the NBA has plenty for which to apologize. When Chuck Cooper, Nat "Sweetwater" Clifton, and Lloyd entered the league in the 1950-51 season, it did not trigger some tsunami of talent washing into the NBA. Rosters were small and there were unofficial quotas that lasted well into the '70s. It was well understood that a black player was going to have to be substantially better to the point of being irreplaceable to beat out a white player for a job. There weren't any black journeymen sitting at the end of NBA benches.

Race was a major issue for a long, long time. It was quite a big deal when both the Celtics (Russell, Satch Sanders, Willie Naulls, Sam Jones, K.C. Jones) and 76ers (Wilt Chamberlain, Chet Walker, Luke Jackson, Hal Greer, Wally, later Wali Jones) shattered convention by starting five black players in the 1965-66 season. Everyone understood that the reason the St. Louis Hawks, located in America's "northernmost Southern city," moved to more progressive Atlanta in 1968 was race, just as everyone understood that the reason the Hawks would later trade potential star Paul Silas to Phoenix for white stiff Gary Gregor a year later was the desire to whiten the lineup a little. A few years later, there was quite a stir when the Knicks finalized the first all-black 12-man roster.

No team was more in the hurricane's eye than our own Celtics, who, after winning 16 championships, found that some people wished them to apologize for having employed such white stars as John Havlicek, Dave Cowens, Larry Bird, Kevin McHale, Danny Ainge, Scott Wedman, and Bill Walton. The team that

drafted the first black player, hired the NBA's first black coach (the first of five, at last count), and whose franchise icon insisted on black-white roommate pairings (I can bear personal testimony to this) found its image threatened by being regarded as too white in an increasingly black-oriented league. In retrospect, I guess this was an enormous compliment for the NBA itself.

But the NBA's embrace of color doesn't stop with players and coaches. At present, there are four blacks calling the organizational shots as either general managers or vice presidents of operations, or whatever. In addition, Elgin Baylor, in charge of the Clippers' personnel affairs since 1986, was let go earlier this season. But who should be surprised? Wayne Embry was given control of the Bucks in 1971.

The only major professional sports league with black ownership? The NBA, of course (Charlotte Bobcats).

Referees? Plenty of those have come and gone, including some of the best (Hugh Evans, Danny Crawford) and, yup, some of the worst (as with their white counterparts, far too many candidates to enumerate). And that is what's so important to note about the NBA.

There have been plenty of failed black head coaches, and isn't that the point? All anyone, black, white, Asian, whatever, can ask for is a fair chance. There's no inherent barrier in the NBA, and there's no condescension, either. It's produce or get out, which is as it should be.

The NBA is the land of administrative fairness and opportunity, and on the playing front, the days are long gone when a black man must be twice as good as a white man to secure a job. There are countless examples of black journeymen, men who bounce from team to team as glorified Kelly Girls.

Ever hear of Kevin Ollie? Since entering the league in 1997, the former University of Connecticut star has played for 11 teams, one of them (Philadelphia) three times and another (Orlando) twice. It is a journey that would have been unimaginable for someone such as Cleo Hill, a great black player of the late '50s and through the '60s who could not get a job in the league even though he was, by all

anecdotal evidence, one of the top 10 guards alive. It's not unlike telling people in Honolulu 36 years ago that in their midst was a mixed-race 11-year-old who would grow up to be president.

But no less significant is the coaching resume of a Bernie Bickerstaff, who was no big basketball star, no household name, but who, after being introduced to the professional basketball world by a mentor named K.C. Jones, would find himself coaching four NBA teams and running another one.

It's an only-in-the-NBA saga.

Barack Obama has to know all this. I'm not saying he has made basketball his sport of choice for this reason, but I don't know that he hasn't.

Farewell

August 12, 2012

Dream job, and a labor of love

LONDON — Day One did not begin well. En route to the Globe for my first day as a summer intern, I was sideswiped on Storrow Drive by a Bloodmobile.

Since then, no complaints.

Forty-four years later, I'm still here, which is truly remarkable. How many columnists on a major American daily newspaper have spent their entire journalistic lives with one newspaper? The answer is close to zero. But why would I want to go anywhere else?

By the way, that first day quickly got better. When I finally arrived at the paper for my first day of summer employment, the first person I met was a fellow 1968 Globe summer sports intern. It was a North Carolina Tar Heel named Peter Gammons. We've been friends ever since.

When I was a student at Boston College and a fervent newspaper reader, my fantasy was to work for the Boston Globe. It became a case of Mission Accomplished, with every reasonable wish fulfilled. Now it is time to step aside, though not completely out of sight. When I hit the "send" button on my gold medal basketball game column, I will cease to be a full-time employee of the only newspaper I have ever worked for after graduating from college. But let's not call it "retirement." I choose to call it "Transition to Phase Two."

Sports Editor Joe Sullivan, who among his other distinctions is the only sports editor I have worked for who loves and knows more about college basketball than I do, has graciously asked me to remain as a Sunday contributor for somewhere between 30-40 and 40 times a year. But make no mistake: I'm stepping aside from full-time duty. Post-Olympics, I will have covered my last event and written my last deadline story for the paper that has been my home for 44 years.

It is a totally different sports journalism world from the one I first inhabited.

When I began in 1968, we used typewriters, and copy, both from local venues and the road, was sent via Western Union. There were at least three middlemen standing between me and the reader. Now there is one. The technological advances border on science fiction for the 1968 mind. I could have sent this column via my BlackBerry were it necessary. When I started, there was no such thing as “call waiting.” Forget about cellphones. Beepers were far in the future.

The people men I worked with, and so admired, included thorough professionals, many of whom had been born between 1900 and 1920. Two of them, the great columnist Harold Kaese and the pioneer basketball writer Jack Barry (who had covered the first Celtics practice in 1946 and who was the first person to formulate the concept of the turnover) never learned to drive a car. Desk men had fistfights over glue pots. Just about everybody smoked, and a startling percentage of working sportswriters in this town were either reformed or functional alcoholics.

For the likes of Gammons and Ryan, the Boston Globe was the place to be. Tom Winship was the editor, and because of him, the Boston Globe was that rarity among American dailies: a writer’s paper, not, as were most papers then (and, sadly, some even now), an editor’s paper.

In those days, the Globe still had separate morning and evening editions. Fran Rosa was the morning sports editor. Ernie Roberts ran the Evening Globe. Jerry Nason, who had been with the paper since the late ’30s-early ’40s, was the Executive Sports Editor and he still wrote six (6) columns a week. What those three had in common was a commitment to writers, especially young ones.

Gammons and Ryan were allowed to go crazy, to be creative. When we needed reining in, there were watchful desk men such as Art Keefe to lend advice. But we were always encouraged to swing for the fences, with our particular points of view, about baseball, basketball, football, anything.

The Old Guard was often quite amused. One of our colleagues was the acerbic Clif Keane, a figure who would have no place in today’s scheme of things, which is modern journalism’s loss. Apprised that the bosses were considering having Peter

cover the Red Sox for the Morning Globe and me for the Evening Globe, Keane sneered, "Oh, that'll be great. Gammons will write about wars and symphonies, and Ryan will complain about the umpires."

Clif was a larger-than-life figure, as was Roger Birtwell, a veteran baseball writer whom I nicknamed the "Dash King." I had never seen a man use so many dashes. Roger was famous for padding (in bedroom slippers) into the Fenway press box in the fifth inning or so, saying, "Fill me in, boys." When he discovered I had been born and raised in Trenton, N.J., he asked me if the Hotel Hildebrecht was still there. I said yes. He then informed me that's where he would stay while covering Harvard-Princeton football games in the '20s,

Roger had known Ruth, Cobb, Hornsby, etc. He may even have known Cap Anson. Talk about minute degrees of separation.

Oh my God, John Ahern. Famous for three changes of clothes daily at Newport during an America's Cup, or even at Swampscott. A beautiful blazer. A straw boater. A cigar. A name dropper supreme (don't get him started about Marciano). He used to say to me, "Bobby boy, don't ever read your own stuff." I couldn't understand that. I related more to Jimmy Breslin, who used to say that one of his great thrills was being on the New York subway and sitting next to someone who was reading his column (no picture).

And Bud Collins . . . what can I say, other than no man could have been more helpful and encouraging to a young colleague than Bud Collins. And let me tell you something else. No one has ever written better columns for this paper than Bud Collins, and I'm talking baseball, basketball, boxing, football, among others, not just tennis.

That's saying a lot, because what matters most to me as I wind down my association with this great newspaper is that I firmly believe I have been a member of a true All-Star team in sports journalism for the entire 44 years. We tend to judge sports figures by the number of championship rings they have been fortunate enough to accumulate. I want to be judged by the people who I've worked with. Lists are dangerous, because someone obvious is invariably left off. So I won't risk that. Just appreciate that I have been in a killer lineup for 44 years.

But one person does deserve special note. There are some great women in our business, but I don't know of anyone who has matched Jackie MacMullan's feat of going toe-to-toe with the boys in terms of attaining top-level credibility while not sacrificing a shred of femininity. She is the ultimate role model for any young woman.

I do want it known that I have spent 44 years doing it with from the heart. I have never once written to provoke or to attract attention. I have always done what has come naturally, which doesn't mean it's always been right. No one is right all the time.

So why now? It's time; that's all. I've covered the events I wanted to cover. I reached a goal with the Bruins' Stanley Cup run in 2011 to have covered championships in all four primary pro sports. I've covered 29 Final Fours. London has been my 11th Olympics. I even did a dog show. I am fulfilled.

But there is something else. I occasionally come across some things I wrote years ago, and I say to myself, "I did that?" And I know in my heart I really couldn't match that effort today. That's all a writer needs to know.

My goal is to gain personal life flexibility and to eliminate obligation. I still have the Globe part-time gig and I still have a bit more TV shelf life, how much I really don't know. I want to do what I want to do and not do what I don't want to do. And my wife of 43 years, the former Elaine Murray, is the perfect companion with whom to do or not do whatever it is we're going to do or not do.

See me in a year or so. I'll let you know how it's working out.



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